

Ludlow

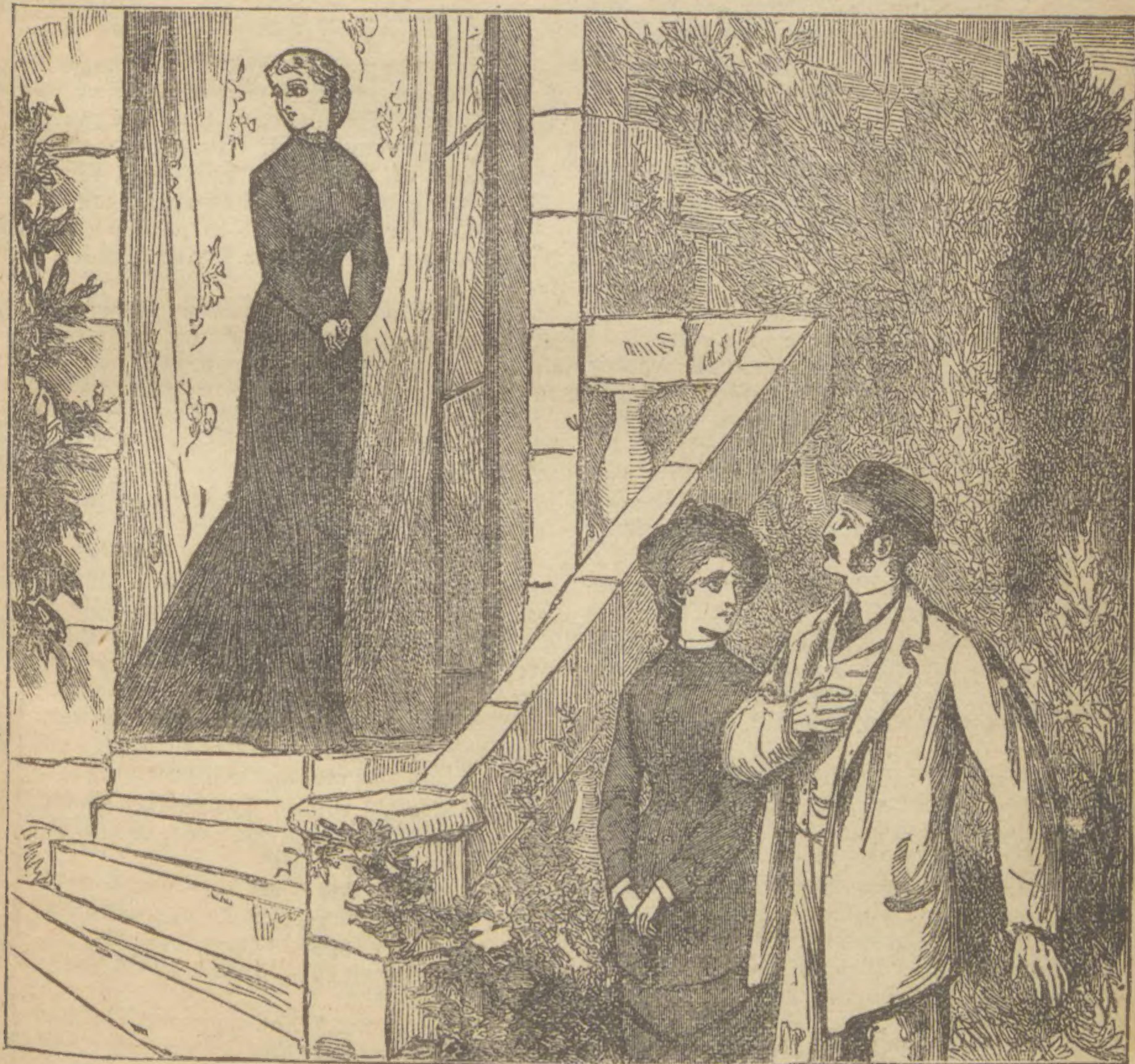
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"SHE STOOD JUST INSIDE THE CASEMENT OF THE LARGE OPEN WINDOW."

HIS HEART'S MISTRESS;

Or, LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT.

BY ARABELLA SOUTHWORTH.

CHAPTER I.

A LONG line of broken, rocky coast, one side

terminated by a rugged, mountainous headland; the other stretching far away, until land, sea and sky meet on the horizon. Hugo breakers, rushing, foaming, roaring, until they fall with thundering crash on the rocks which bar their progress. The air filled with clouds of glittering spray, which the fierce wind is carrying far inland, and scattering like flakes of snow on the short, stunted grass. The red disk of the setting

sun slowly descending from under a heavy bank of clouds, casting a lurid light over the evening sky, and tinting the gleaming crests of the heaving billows with a blood-red glow.

"Oh, for the pencil of a Claude or a Turner, to make it all my very own!"

The words, spoken near me, made me start, for I had fancied myself all alone in the sheltered little cove or inlet, whither I had come to watch the storm.

I turned to see who the speaker could be.

Leaning against a fragment of rock, which some convulsion of nature must, in bygone ages, have torn from the beetling cliff above, stood a tall, powerfully-built man. The words must have fallen from him involuntarily. His dark eyes were fixed on the seething expanse of waters before him, and there was a look of wistful admiration and unsatisfied longing on his pale, handsome face.

For a long time I watched him unseen. Few strangers visited this wild desolate region, and I felt sorely puzzled as to who he could possibly be. That he was a gentleman, there could be no mistake; there was about his whole appearance an air of elegance and refinement not to be disguised by his coarse, rough suit.

The sun sunk slowly down into its watery couch; the red light changed into leaden-gray; nearer and nearer rolled the waves, until one, larger than the rest, broke at my feet, and receded, leaving me drenched with spray.

Then, for the first time, I recognized the folly of which I had been guilty in remaining there so long.

"Come away at once! We have not a moment to spare!" I cried, forgetting all else save our mutual danger.

The stranger turned his head, and gazed at me like one suddenly roused from a dream.

"I do not understand," he said, with a puzzled look.

"Do you not see? The tide is advancing; we are entirely shut in between these rocks, and if we cannot round this point in time—"

I could say no more, for I was struggling with all my strength against the wind, which rendered our progress almost impossible.

On we battled; but soon I saw that all our efforts were in vain. The waves were already dashing against the point of rock round which our path to safety lay.

"Are we too late?" he asked.

"We are."

"Is there no other way out?"

"Could you climb that?" and I pointed to the huge overhanging cliff.

"I might manage it; but you?" And he glanced at my slight, girlish figure.

At another time I could have laughed at the idea of a stranger's being able to accomplish afeat which I, born and bred among these rocks,

would have found impossible; but now the sense of peril and responsibility drowned every other thought.

"Listen!" I shouted—for the howling of the wind and the roar of the sea made it almost impossible to make oneself heard. "There is a path not far from here leading to the top of the cliff; there are few, even among the hardiest fishermen, who care to climb it in calm weather. But it is our last chance. I will risk it; will you?"

"I will."

There was something so self-possessed in his look and tone that I could not but feel thankful for his presence. It seemed such a support and protection.

"This is the path," I said. "Let me go first, I have often climbed part of it, and know where to step. You must follow as best you can."

Straining every nerve; clinging to every uneven point of rock; now gaining a few feet, now slipping back again, I struggled up.

Pausing for a moment to gather breath, I looked down to see how my companion was faring.

Just then a fierce gust of wind swept past, my brain seemed to swim round, my hands relaxed their grasp, there was a dull, heavy pain in my head, and I remembered no more.

When I came to myself, I was lying on a hard, rough surface, which I soon saw to be a narrow ledge of rock, some feet above the level of the water, which had now completely surrounded the base of the cliff.

The full moon was riding high, obscured every now and then by fragments of scurrying, fleecy clouds; and by its fitful light I could see a tender, pitying look on the face which bent over me.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing, we are quite safe; however, we must remain here for the present," was the reply. "But, tell me, are you much hurt?"

"Not at all, I think," I answered, sitting up. "My head feels a little confused, that is all."

"Are you very cold?"

"Not very. But what have you done?"

For now I noticed that he had taken off his coat, and had wrapped it round me.

"I cannot keep this," I said. "Please put it on again."

"Certainly not," he answered, in a tone which I felt would admit of no contradiction. "You want it far more than I do, and I insist on your keeping it. Now drink this."

He poured something out of a flask into a small drinking-cup, and held it to my lips.

The contents revived me, and sent a glow of heat through my chilled frame.

"How did we come here?" I inquired.

"I carried you up."

"You carried me up?"

"Yes. How I managed it, I don't know; though you are no very heavy burden."

"I think I remember falling down."

"Yes; and the fall stunned you. I saw that to ascend the path was out of the question; but I discovered this ledge, and made for it, on the chance of its being above water level. We are all right, I find; for there is no sign of seaweed here."

"You have saved my life. How can I ever thank you?"

"You forget that you first saved mine. If you had not warned me, the tide would have washed me away while I was standing lost in dreamland."

The sense of the terrible danger in which we had been, rushed over me like an overpowering flood, and I began to sob bitterly.

"How silly you must think me!" I said, as soon as I could command my voice. "But I really could not help it."

"Think you silly, my poor child! Certainly not. Indeed, I know few girls who would have acted as bravely as you did. But tell me, how came it that you remained in the cove so long? You must have known how very dangerous it was."

"I do not know. It was very thoughtless of me," I answered.

And, oh, how thankful I felt for the cloud which at that moment was passing over the moon, and which prevented his seeing how the color rushed to my cheeks.

Well did I know why I had remained there so long, and why I had not noticed how rapidly the waves were closing round me.

All my thoughts had been engrossed by the handsome stranger, who, to my romantic, girlish fancy, seemed like the hero of some wonderfully beautiful fairy tale.

"How long must we remain here, I wonder?" I said abruptly, suddenly becoming alive to the peculiar situation in which I found myself.

"Until the tide goes out and sets us free. But what about your friends? Will they not be greatly anxious about you?"

"Oh, no! No one knows that I am out. I expect I shall be back before any one misses me."

He looked at me rather curiously, then said, "How strange it seems that we two should be here together! Both rescued from a sudden, violent death, and waiting for a common deliverance. Yet we do not even know each other's names."

"Yes, it is strange," I assented.

"Shall we introduce ourselves? I am Herbert Cowper. Until within the last year, I was an unknown, struggling artist; trying, vainly, to persuade the public that my daubs were worth money enough to satisfy the demands of my

landlady, and the tradesfolks who supply my wants. Then, however, an old uncle of mine died, and, greatly to my surprise, left me a few hundreds a-year. The first use I made of my newly-found wealth was to travel, and visit all the best picture galleries of Europe. Then I turned my back on civilized life, and started, like a modern Don Quixote, in search of adventures. And a strange one I have encountered, certainly; for I find myself transformed into a knight errant, with an unknown damsel under my protection."

"Unknown she need not remain!" I answered, laughing. "My name is Hester Macdonald, and my father and I live in the old castle which you have noticed on the hill, about half-way between the beach and the village."

"What! In that tumble-down old ruin?" Then checking himself, he said, quickly, "Pardon me! I was very rude. But I fancied that the castle was merely a relic of bygone ages."

"And so it is; and all that is left to my father of the possessions of his ancestors. The Macdonalds have lived there for I am afraid to say how many hundred years. He is the last of the family, and could not bear to leave it."

"But what is it like inside?"

"One wing is weather-proof, and quite habitable. There are more rooms than we want in it. Of the rest, I cannot say a great deal. It will hardly hold together much longer."

"And you do not think that there is any danger of your father's missing you, Miss Macdonald?"

"Oh, do not trouble about him! He cares for nothing but his scientific books, electric batteries, and bottles of acids. He spends all the day, and most of the night, in his laboratory, trying experiments, or studying. He never knows where I am, or what I am doing."

"But the servants?"

"We have only one, an old woman. I had a bad headache this evening, and told her that I was going to bed; but I changed my mind, and came down to the beach instead, to watch the storm. You cannot think how I love the sea."

"You have had quite enough of it for this time, I fancy. I fear you will suffer severely from the effects of this night's exposure."

"Oh, no; I am so strong that nothing ever does me any harm." But though I would not acknowledge it, I did feel bitterly cold, sitting there in my dripping clothes, exposed to the full force of the wind, which, though far less violent than it had been before, swept every now and then in wild gusts along the face of the cliff.

Mr. Cowper, too, was shivering, and I could see that his lips and cheeks were blue with cold.

"I wish you would take back your coat?" I said. "I really do not want it."

"Nor do I; please do not speak of it again."

After that we relapsed into almost total silence. Slowly the hours dragged on; the moon disappeared behind the rocky headland, and the first gray streaks of dawn began to appear in the sky. As the light increased, we saw, to our intense relief, that a narrow strip of sand at the base of the cliff was uncovered, which rapidly grew wider and wider.

"I think we can almost get round the corner now," I said; "the tide is out as far as the place where we were standing last evening."

"Let us try, at any rate; but how are you to get down from here?"

"Easily enough; I have let myself slip down higher places than this, hundreds of times." The next moment I had safely reached the level ground, and was watching the descent of my companion, which was performed much more slowly than my own. "Neither of us is very sorry to have left our perch in mid-air," he said, as he rejoined me; "but you must get home as quickly as possible, and take off your wet things. Our roads lie in the same direction, do they not?"

"They do."

"Will you take my arm?"

"No, thank you."

But hardly had I uttered the refusal, when my foot tripped over a mass of tangled seaweed, and I fell to the ground. As he helped me to rise, he saw that I was trembling all over.

"You must let me help you," he said, decidedly, but gently. I felt that I needed the support, and did not refuse again. Leaning on his strong arm, we soon reached the ruined archway with its ponderous iron gate, destitute however of bolt or bar, which led into the castle court.

"I will say good-by now, Miss Macdonald," he said; "but our acquaintance, so strangely begun, must not end here." And, with a warm pressure of my hand, he turned away.

CHAPTER II.

THE entrance stood open, for old Elsbeth was an early riser. Passing through the spacious hall, with its broken marble pillars and discolored banners, I ran up-stairs, hoping to gain my own room unobserved; but just as I reached the door there was Elsbeth.

"Miss Hester," she exclaimed, "wherever have you been?"

"Only to the strand, and got wet. I will undress at once and go to bed; come in, and I will tell you all about it."

With her assistance I was soon comfortably settled, and had given her an account of my adventure in as few words as possible.

"Thank goodness, you are safe, my lamb!" was all that she said, but her voice trembled, and there were tears in her eyes.

Flinging my arms round the good old woman's neck, my self-control again gave way, and my over-wrought feelings found vent in a passionate fit of weeping.

She soothed and caressed me, as she had often done in my childish days; for since my dying mother had placed me, an infant of a few weeks old, in her arms, she had loved and cared for me as though I had been her own child.

When I grew calmer she brought a warm drink; then darkening the room, and bidding me try to sleep, she left me alone.

But to sleep was, I found, impossible. My mind kept running on the events of the last few hours; my thoughts, however, were less occupied with the danger in which I had been, than with the companion who had shared it with me.

Soon I found myself drawing a comparison between him and the few gentlemen with whom I came in contact in my secluded Scottish home.

There was Mr. Dare, the clergyman, of whom I stood so much in awe. He always treated me like a child, too insignificant to be noticed by a man of his talents and position. The other day, when I was hurrying home to escape from a drenching shower, he had passed me, umbrella in hand, while I had none; but the thought of going a little out of his way to shelter me never occurred to him.

Then there was Mr. St. John, whose father had bought up all the property which should have belonged to mine. He was the personification of a London exquisite, and never honored me with more than a supercilious nod or "How do you do?" whenever we chanced to encounter each other, while he was down here for a few weeks in the shooting season.

Then I thought of Harry Bolton, who had just succeeded his father as Mr. John's agent, and my heart began to beat faster. I had known him all my life, we had played together as children, and wandered hand in hand among the rocks. Many were the dangerous places into which he had led me, but he always contrived to bring me back again safely, often at great risk to himself. When I heard that he was to be sent away to an English school, I wept bitterly, and he comforted me, promising soon to grow up to be a man, when he would come back for his little wife.

I did not meet him again until within the last few weeks, and then I found that my boyish lover had changed into a fine, handsome young fellow. We called each other Hester and Harry, as of old, but his manner to me was formal and reserved; he never alluded to

the parting promise; but somehow I felt that the girl held a far dearer place in his heart than the child had done.

I really liked and admired Harry very much, but now I caught myself wishing that he were more like Mr. Cowper. Then I began to speculate as to when and how I should meet the artist again.

As might have been expected, a severe cold was the result of the chill I had received, and for several days I was unable to leave my room.

"Very imprudent—very!" was my father's verdict when he heard of what had happened. "Really, Hester, a girl of nineteen ought to be old enough to take care of herself; but was there ever a woman yet who was not always getting into mischief?"

That was all he said; not one word of thankfulness for my escape, not a word of endearment for the only daughter, who but for the merest chance might have been brought home to him lifeless.

Still I knew that I had nothing else to expect; he had never shown me any mark of affection, and I felt that he was inclined to look on me only as a care and incumbrance.

To be foolish, weak, or womanly was, in his opinion, the greatest blemish a character could have; and even as a child, I had never dared to let him see how happy a few kind, loving words would have made me.

Of my father's history I knew but little.

He never spoke to me of his past life, and I never dared to ask him any questions.

My mother's name he never mentioned to me.

In the little graveyard, just outside the village, there was a simple headstone, with the inscription:—

"ALICE MACDONALD. Aged 19."

There I would often sit and dream, and picture to myself how different my life would have been had my mother lived.

I thought of her—so young and lovely, snatched away in the spring-time of her loveliness; for she had been very happy, Elsbeth told me. She and my father had been all in all to each other during their brief wedded life.

Her death seemed to have changed him completely. The brightness had vanished from his life, never again to return.

Of me he rarely took any notice. None of the love he had lavished on his wife was transferred to his child.

My laugh was always hushed at his approach, and I never went to him with any of my childish joys or troubles.

And so I had grown up almost as neglected

and untamed as one of the wild flowers growing among the rocks which I loved so well, acquiring a strange, desultory education, partly from Elsbeth, partly from the village schoolmaster, who used to come to me for a couple of hours each evening.

I was taught none of the accomplishments generally supposed to form part of a young lady's education; but my mind was stored with weird legends and tales of romance which I had heard from Elsbeth, or read in some of the old volumes which were lying in musty piles on the shelves of the deserted library of the Castle.

Once my father had found me poring over one of these romances.

"What are you reading, Hester?" he asked, in his cold, hard voice.

I handed him the book, in silence.

Scornfully he turned over the pages, and my heart beat faster as I watched his cynical smile.

"Can you find nothing better than this to read?" he asked, returning it to me. "Come, and I will find you a more profitable study."

I followed him to the room which he used as study and laboratory, and stood nervously by the door, while he selected a large volume, in dark, plain binding.

"This is a history of England," he said, giving it to me. "When you have read it, I shall expect you to be able to answer some questions as to its contents."

I did my best to remember the long names, and the dates of the several events, and by dint of hard work succeeded pretty well.

Then I felt that perhaps I might win some words of praise from him.

"I have finished the history, father," I said to him, one day. "And I think I can remember a great deal of it."

"Very well. You can leave it on my table," he answered, and never alluded to the subject again.

That was the only attempt he ever made to superintend my education personally, and I did not read much more history.

"It is so fine, I almost think I might venture out for an hour," I said to Elsbeth one day, about a fortnight after my adventure on the beach. She did not appear at all pleased at my suggestion, and looked doubtfully first at the sky, then at me.

"You will be sure to sit down, or do something foolish, and so catch fresh cold," she objected; "and if it does look bright now, you know how quickly the days change in spring."

"Nonsense, Elsbeth! The sun is quite hot, and there is not a cloud in the sky, and I am longing so to go out."

"Well, wait till to-morrow; and I shall be able to go with you. I can't to-day, for I

have a good deal of cleaning up to do. You look so pale and weak, I don't like the thought of your going by yourself."

But I had no wish for Elsbeth's company. I wanted to go alone to the beach. A strange, vivid attraction had seemed to draw me thither, through the long, weary days of my imprisonment in my room. I had been longing for the time when I could stand at the foot of that cliff, and watch those waves which had so nearly claimed me as their prey.

Elsbeth's objections were at last overruled, and I started forth. The fresh sea-breeze revived me; still I felt very tired by the time I reached the strand. The sea was as smooth as a sheet of glass; the blue sky reflected in its depths; not a sound to be heard but the gentle plashing of the ripples on the sand, and the occasional cries of the seabirds among the rocks.

"Has he been here since, I wonder?" I said to myself, as I approached the sea. Then I started; my heart began to beat violently, and hot blood rushed to my cheeks. Within a few yards of me sat the man of whom I had been thinking; before him was an easel with a half-finished painting, and he held a brush in his hand, but his gaze was fixed intently on the view before him, as though drinking in its calm, peaceful loveliness.

I was about to retreat unobserved, when, suddenly turning his head, our looks met. His countenance changed in a moment; the dreamy expression disappeared, and it wore a look of unmistakable pleasure as he came forward to meet me with outstretched hand.

"I am so glad that you are well enough to venture out," he said. "I have been to the Castle several times to inquire for you, and was always told that you were still very unwell."

"Several times!" I exclaimed. "Elsbeth only told me of once."

Scarcely had I uttered the words, when I was very sorry for them. Elsbeth seemed to have taken some unaccountable dislike to my new friend, and I felt that I had now prejudiced him against her, even had he been disposed to like her.

His next remark showed that I was right.

"So Elsbeth is the name of the old dragon who guards the Castle," he said, looking very much amused. "What a shame of her not to give you the polite messages I sent you; but I assure you it was like bearding the lion in his den to venture near her. It was no small proof of courage to call again yesterday, she glared so at me the previous time. However, greatly to my surprise, it was your father whom I encountered."

"My father? And what did he say?" I inquired, eagerly.

"I don't think I ought to tell you."

"Oh, please do! Nothing very flattering; I feel sure of that."

"No; it was not flattering. Something about some people never having sense. But tell me about this Elsbeth. Does she keep you in great order?"

"Elsbeth is the dearest, best old woman in the world!" I answered, warmly. "I cannot imagine why she does not like you."

"Perhaps she thinks that I am to blame for the other night."

"How could she? And, indeed, I told her how nice and kind you were. But how ungrateful you must think me? I have not even thanked you."

"Please let there be no question of thanks between us, Miss Macdonald. Let us look on what happened as the beginning of a friendship which will, I trust, last a long, long time."

I looked at him in great surprise. What could this man mean, this hero, artist, genius, as I called him to myself, by asking for my friendship? What could there be in common between him and an insignificant, half-educated girl like me?

"Well," he asked, watching my countenance, "are we to be friends?"

My eyes gave the assent which my lips could not frame, and I placed my hand in his, which he had extended toward me.

"May I look at your painting?" I asked, feeling that I ought to say something.

"Certainly; but it is not nearly finished yet. I only commenced it yesterday. I call it 'Calm.' I have painted its companion, 'Storm,' which I hope to have the pleasure of showing you some day."

"Oh, thank you! This is beautiful; but I am interrupting you?"

"I can talk and work. Look at that gleam of sunshine on those rocks near the horizon. I want to catch it. Will you sit down here for awhile, or are you afraid of cold?"

I thought of Elsbeth's many injunctions on no account to sit down, and to return home soon. I remembered that Harry Bolton had sent word that he would call at the Castle that afternoon, when he hoped to be able to see me. I hesitated for a moment or two, and sat down beside Mr. Cowper.

"Will you tell me something about London and the great world you have lived in?" I said. "It is an unknown land to me."

"And I know it but too well."

Then he began to speak of the busy, bustling life which men and women had in the great capital, so totally different from the dreamy, monotonous existence to which I had been accustomed. He told me about the marvels of human genius, of which, until now, I had only read in books. But his tone was cold and indifferent until he began to speak of art.

Then he warmed, his words came rapidly, eagerly, with a power and force of description which, to me, seemed perfectly wonderful.

The wonderful cathedrals and galleries of Rome, Florence, Paris, Antwerp, Brussels, and I know not how many others, he had visited them all, and reveled among their priceless treasures, feasting on them as only an artist can.

I sat silent and breathless, listening as one spellbound. Suddenly he stopped, a look of intense annoyance passed over his visage, and he set his lips tightly together.

I glanced round to discover the cause of the change, and a thrill of something like contrite pain shot through my heart, for beside us stood Harry Bolton, watching me with an expression of mingled surprise and reproach.

"Oh, is it you? You quite startled me!" I said, with an uneasy laugh. "I had not an idea that you were here."

I was trying hard to appear quite at my ease; but felt that I was failing signally.

"I am sorry if I frightened you, Hester," he said, gravely; "but I found Elsbeth quite in a fright about you. She said that you were remaining out far too long; so I offered to go and look for you."

"Will Elsbeth ever find out that I am no longer a baby?" I exclaimed, angrily.

"She knows that if you are not a little more prudent you will make yourself ill again. Please come home with me now."

"She must blame me, and not Miss Macdonald," said Mr. Cowper, now speaking for the first time, but without raising his head from his painting. "I persuaded her to sit down, and kept her talking until I quite forgot the flight of time."

"Mr. Cowper—Mr. Bolton," I blurted out, as it suddenly occurred to me that I ought to introduce the gentlemen.

Mr. Cowper rose, and bowed politely. Harry made the faintest possible inclination of his head, a look passed between them, and I felt that these two men could never be friends.

A strong contrast they certainly presented to each other. Both about the same height and figure; but, oh, how different their features! Harry's handsome and good-humored, fair skin and hair, and light blue eyes; Mr. Cowper's dark as an Italian's, strongly marked, but exquisitely molded, and eyes dark and liquid, whose expression changed with every varying emotion. Now there was an angry sparkle in them, as, with an impatient movement, he raised his hand to sweep back the hair which had fallen over his high forehead.

"Come, now, Hester, like a good girl," said Harry, turning again to me.

It was not so much his familiar, protecting manner which vexed me, but that Mr. Cowper

should be a spectator of the scene. Still, had I asked myself why I minded it, I could not have answered the question.

I knew that Harry would not leave the beach without me, and rose to go in no very amiable mood, which was not at all mollified by the peculiar smile which played round Mr. Cowper's lips as I bade him good-by.

CHAPTER III.

"You and that man seem to have struck up a great friendship," was Harry's first remark as we walked along.

"Why should you think so? It is only the second time we have met."

"In my opinion you ought to have had quite enough of him the first time."

"Harry, what do you mean?"

"I mean that I wish you had let him get up the rock by himself, without waiting to keep him company."

My anger was fairly roused by this last remark.

"How dare you speak to me like that?" I cried. "Do you think I am to submit to be lectured by you?"

"I do not want to lecture. I only want you to have nothing more to say to that good-for-nothing adventurer."

"Not another word, please. What right have you to abuse the man who saved my life? I will not allow it, I can tell you. Now good-by. I am going to walk home by myself."

But, by a quick movement, he placed himself before me, and laid his hands on my shoulders.

"Do not be angry with me, Hester," he said, in penitent tones. "I spoke hastily just now. Will you forgive me?"

"Yes, if you promise not to be so unreasonable and unjust again."

"I will promise. But, oh, Hester, you do not know how it pained me to see you sitting talking to a man you knew nothing whatever about, as if you were the greatest possible friends."

There was a tremor in his voice, and he looked so mournful, that I felt sorry for him, and terribly discontented with myself; why, I hardly knew.

"Are we to part friends, Hester?" Harry asked.

"What do you mean by parting?"

"I forgot; I have not told you yet. I must go away this evening on business for Mr. St. John, and I hardly think I can be back much before a month."

I felt more than relieved—was delighted; but I hated myself for the feeling, and tried hard to fancy that I was speaking the truth when I said, "That is a pity, and we have

seen so little of you since we came here; but a month will pass quickly."

"Ah, little did I think what that month was to bring me!"

"Hester, before I go, tell me that you care a little for me; tell me that you will not forget me while I am away."

"We are too old friends to forget each other so easily," I said, hastily; "but if I delay much longer, Elsbeth will come to look for me herself."

And I hurried on so quickly that he had to walk with hasty strides to keep pace with me.

He followed me into the hall of the Castle, and then, seizing my hand, said in a low, husky voice, "Come into the drawing-room with me. There is something I want particularly to say to you."

"No, not now; I haven't time!"

And bursting from him, I rushed up-stairs to my room.

Exhausted by the exertion, I sunk on a chair, and panted for breath. Soon the sound of voices in the court-yard below attracted my attention, and, approaching the open window, I looked out.

Elsbeth and Harry were standing together in close conversation.

"How much longer does that man intend to stay?" I heard him ask, in angry, impatient tones.

"I do not know; but, Master Harry, I will do my best not to let her see much of him."

"Thanks, a thousand times, Elsbeth! You were always a good friend to me, and I can tell you—"

Just then they moved to some little distance from the window, and I did not catch the rest of the sentence.

For more than a quarter of an hour longer I watched them, as they stood talking by the gate. Then I saw how he grasped the rough hand of the old servant and walked quickly down the road toward the village. Elsbeth watched him till he was out of sight, then slowly returned to the Castle.

I felt angry; the spirit of opposition was thoroughly roused. These two were fast allies, nor could I doubt that all their conversation had been about me. And so Elsbeth was to watch me, and prevent my seeing much of Mr. Cowper, the hero who had condescended to stoop to my level, and ask me to be his friend! But they should not succeed; on that point I had made up my mind. What right had Harry to set a spy over my actions? I would not submit to such interference.

But I remembered the right which I well knew that Harry hoped and expected to possess, and felt wretched and miserable, and longed to escape to some place where I should never see him again.

To my great surprise, when next I encountered Elsbeth she made no remark whatever, either about Harry or about my remaining out so long. But that night, just as I was falling asleep, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and looking up, saw her bending over me.

"Is anything the matter?" I asked.

"No, love; I only wanted to say good-night. And, oh! Miss Hester, don't forget Master Harry, who has loved you all his life! New features may be handsomer, and new voices more pleasant, but what are they against a faithful heart?"

I could not answer; but I threw my arms round her neck, and kissed her rugged face again and again.

The next morning was wet and stormy, and hour after hour the rain fell in a steady down-pour.

"No walk for me to-day," I thought, regretfully, as I stood by the window after luncheon, watching the heavy sky.

The time dragged on very slowly; neither work nor books seemed to have the power to interest me; nor did I care to seek Elsbeth's company, not wishing to give her an opportunity of speaking to me on the subject which, I guessed, was uppermost in her mind.

"By the way, Hester" said my father, as we sat together at dinner that evening, "I went to-day to call on that Mr. Cowper with whom you distinguished yourself so signally a short time ago. He seems an uncommonly sensible, gentlemanlike man. What a pity he spends all his time over those daubs! He tells me he has done nothing but paint since he came here. However, I have asked him to luncheon tomorrow. Will you and Elsbeth see that everything is as it should be?"

The expression on the countenance of Elsbeth, who had entered the room in time to hear this piece of information, was certainly not very amiable; and as she went out again, she closed the door with a bang which made even my father look up in surprise.

At two o'clock next day our guest arrived. During luncheon I took but little part in the conversation. My father's presence always kept me very silent; and, besides that, the topics which they chose were far too deep for me.

There was not a subject on which Mr. Cowper did not appear to be quite at home; and I could see how my father's cold, stern countenance assumed a look of ever-increasing interest and pleasure, a very unusual thing with him.

They went into the laboratory together, and I sat by one of the mullioned windows of the apartment which we used as a drawing-room, trying to fix my attention on a book which lay on my knee.

A couple of hours passed thus. Then I heard steps approaching, and looking up, saw my father and Mr. Cowper.

"Mr. Cowper says that he would like to see the unused part of the Castle," said my father. "I have some important letters to write, so will you take him over it?"

"With pleasure," I answered, springing up. "Now prepare for a scramble through all kinds of out-of-the-way places, and I can tell you no end of ghost stories, legends, and—"

"Hester!" My father's tone and the look that accompanied it made me long to sink into the ground at my feet.

"Shall we start at once, Miss Macdonald?" said Mr. Cowper, in his pleasant, cordial voice; "it is past five now, and the light will soon begin to fade."

Through suits of stately apartments, hung with discolored tapestry; along weird passages, where the sound of our footsteps awoke strange, lingering echoes, we wandered. Then we climbed up flight after flight of broken stone stairs, until we reached a little turret chamber, the highest in the castle.

"Let us rest here and enjoy the view," he said, leaning out of the window. "And now for one of the stories you promised me. Let it be a legend of the Castle, if you please. I would like to hear something about the former inhabitants."

I looked at him to see if he were laughing at me, but there was no ridicule in the look which met mine; and all my shyness vanished at once.

"I will tell you about the beautiful Edith Macdonald," I said. "She lived here more than two hundred years ago. She was engaged to her cousin, Lord Ronald. She loved him passionately, and he thought that he loved her until a friend of hers, Lady Elsie, came to the Castle. She was as fair and lovely as Lady Edith was dark and stately, and when Lord Ronald saw her he liked her best. Edith hid herself behind the tapestry one day, and heard him telling her so. But Lady Elsie liked some one else, and would have nothing to do with him, so he soon went back to his first love. She pretended to forgive him, and one day, as he was starting for the hunt, she brought out a stirrup-cup, drank some of it, and handed him the goblet. He drained it, and five minutes later they were both dead. She had poisoned herself and him. That is all."

"And quite enough. What a terrible tale you chose! I wonder if you could act like that, Miss Macdonald? Have you ever fancied yourself in Edith's place?"

"I have."

"Well?"

"I would have done the same. Even more;

all three should have died. What right had he to offer her the crumbs of his love?"

Why I spoke thus I never knew. Often had I thought over the legend, and fancied the repentant lover pleading for forgiveness. Edith at first proud, cold, and disdainful; but gradually relenting, and at last whispering, "I forgive all. You love me, and me alone, now; let the past be forgotten!"

I was sorry for what I had said; yet felt ashamed to recall it, though I saw that he was watching me with a look of almost pained surprise.

"It is getting quite dark. We must go now," I said, rising, and leading the way down the narrow, winding stairs.

CHAPTER IV.

I WENT down to the beach again next morning, taking care not to tell Elsbeth that I was going out.

I tried to persuade myself that I did not expect to meet Mr. Cowper; but the day looked less bright, and a gloom seemed to fall over sea and land when I found that he was not there.

Before long, however, I heard steps behind me, and knew who was coming, even before I heard a well-known voice exclaim, "Good-morning, Miss Macdonald! How fortunate that I should have met you! Will you come and talk to me while I finish my picture?"

So we sat and talked; or, rather, he talked, and I listened, like one in an enchanted dream.

The next morning found us there again; and the next, and the next.

Nor were our meetings confined to the beach; for my father, having taken a great fancy to Mr. Cowper, used to ask him to the Castle almost every other day.

They would pass hours in the laboratory, trying experiments, or discussing some new scientific discovery. Then, as the shadows lengthened, it generally fell to my lot to entertain our guest, and we would sit in some deserted chamber or ruined turret, while I told him some of the weird old legends with which my memory was stored.

But there was one tale which he never asked me to repeat a second time—that about Edith Macdonald and her wavering lover.

"By the way, who is that Mr. Bolton who carried you off so unceremoniously from me the other afternoon?" he asked me once. "He seemed to think that you had no right whatever to talk to me, and you obeyed him as meekly as possible."

"He is Mr. St. John's agent," I answered. "We have known each other all our lives, and he is accustomed to treat me as though I were his sister."

"Then he is a friend, and nothing more?"

"Nothing more," I said, decidedly.

And after that, neither of us spoke of Harry again.

During those days, Elsbeth and I said very little to each other. A shadow had fallen between us, which I, for my part, made no effort to remove.

Once or twice she commenced to warn me about what she termed my heartless folly; and the answers which I gave her were so short and cold, that she soon gave up the attempt to influence my conduct.

Her looks used to follow me sadly and wistfully.

I saw that she was very unhappy; but tried not to think about her, and avoided being alone with her as much as possible.

"Come with me, Hester; I have something to say to you," said my father, one afternoon, as he met me in the hall.

Very much surprised, I followed him into the laboratory; for it was seldom, indeed, that he wanted to speak to me.

He handed me an open letter, and then, sitting down, turned over the pages of a book while I read it.

It was dated from London; written by a dying man to his brother, entreating forgiveness for the many wrongs he had done him, and begging him to give a home to his only daughter, so soon to be left a friendless orphan.

"I do not quite understand," I said, when I had finished.

"I dare say not," my father answered.

And rising, he commenced to pace the room, his head sunk on his breast, his arms crossed behind his back.

I knew he would soon speak, and waited in silent expectation.

"You never heard that I had a brother," he began. "For many years I have not mentioned his name, and never intended to do so again. But he is dying now, and I must try to forgive him. He wronged me terribly! First he robbed me of my father's love and trust, by false, malicious stories, too cleverly constructed to be doubted, and so succeeded in obtaining the greater part of the inheritance to which, as the elder son, I had a just claim. His ill-gotten gains did not prosper with him. A few years saw him almost reduced to beggary, and he fled the country, to escape from his creditors. All that I heard of him since was that he had married a low-born French actress, whom he expected to support both her and himself. Now do you understand the letter?"

"Yes, father. He wants you to take his daughter to live here?"

"That is just it! And I suppose I must—of course I must. Poor Leonard!"

And he brushed away the first tear I ever remembered having seen him shed.

Then, as though ashamed of himself for his momentary weakness, he said, in his usual hard, business-like tones, "I will start at once for London. Let me see! I can be there tomorrow afternoon, and I will write to let you know when to expect us. Now go! I have some business to attend to. Tell Elsbeth that your cousin is coming, and have one of the rooms near yours ready for her."

"Humph!" was Elsbeth's ejaculation when I told her the news. "There never was much good in Master Leonard. *His* child, indeed!—and her mother a French play-actor! A nice young lady to bring here as a companion for you!"

"What do you know about her mother?" I inquired.

For on that point I had thought it better not to give her any information.

"I knew your father and all his family long before you were born, Miss Hester; and as long as I live I shall never forget the day the news of his marriage came."

"Tell me something about my uncle, please," I said.

"There is not a great deal to tell. Strangers thought him a handsome, frank, open-hearted young man; but I knew better. I saw how mean and selfish he was at heart. Still, nearly every one liked him, he had such a pleasant, winning manner. As to your father, he thought that there was no one like him in the world. He only discovered his mistake when your grandfather accused him of having forged his name for large sums of money. It was your uncle who had done it. He tried to shield himself by throwing the blame on his brother. The proofs of Mr. Leonard's guilt were plain enough, but the old gentleman would believe nothing against his favorite son. Shortly after he got what money he could from him and went abroad. He used to write nice long letters home—so loving and affectionate—but he never failed to ask for more money in them. The time came when there was no more money to send, and when he found that out his letters soon stopped. For a long time nothing was heard of him, until, one day, a letter came from a friend of your grandfather's, telling him that he was hiding away from his creditors, and that he was married to a beautiful young actress. Poor old man, he never recovered the shock, so great was his grief; but from that day to this I never heard Mr. Leonard's name mentioned by any of the family."

"That is shocking! But we must not blame my cousin for her father's crimes."

"She is *his* child—that is enough for me!"

"Come, now, Elsbeth, you are very unjust; and she may be very nice, after all."

"Not very much chance of that, I fancy, Miss Hester."

"Time will show, Elsbeth."

"Yes; time will show!"

"How old is my cousin, do you know?"

"Let me see; her father was married some time before yours. I suppose his daughter is about twenty or twenty-one."

"I wonder whether I shall like her, Elsbeth. Oh, if we could only love each other like sisters! —I have so longed for a sister all my life. I am glad she is coming."

Elsbeth did not answer, and I went away, speculating as to what the new addition to our family would be like.

The day on which I heard that I might expect my father and cousin, arrived. From the window of my room I could see far down the road, and here I stood watching, for the first appearance of the carriage. At last it came in sight, and long before it drove up to the Castle, I was standing at the open door to receive the travelers.

"Renee, this is your cousin, Hester," said my father, when he had handed out a slight, graceful-looking girl, dressed in deep mourning.

Her face was very pale; there were heavy circles under her dark violet eyes, but the first glance showed me that she was very lovely.

"Welcome home!" I exclaimed, kissing her affectionately.

She submitted languidly to the embrace, then said, in a low, sweet voice, with a slightly foreign accent, "My head is aching badly, and I am very tired; may I go to my room at once?"

I went up-stairs with her to the little chamber which I had taken such pains to arrange prettily for her reception. Spring flowers, even in the beginning of May were very rare with us, still I had contrived to find enough to fill some vases. I almost hoped that she would have remarked them, but she seemed too listless and weary to notice anything.

"So your cousin has arrived, Miss Macdonald," said Mr. Cowper to me the next morning, as we strolled together along the beach.

"Yes; she came yesterday morning."

"Well, describe her."

"She is lovely!" I exclaimed; then seeing his incredulous look, I added, "You seem to have no opinion whatever of my taste, but wait until you see her, and you will have to acknowledge that I am right."

"Why did you not bring her out with you?"

"I made her remain in bed for breakfast;

but if you come in to luncheon, you can make her acquaintance."

"And until then I can wait patiently."

Then we began to talk of other things until it was almost time for us to return home.

Something fluttered in the air, and fell on the sand at our feet. He stooped and picked it up; it was only a spray of purple heather, which the breeze had carried down from the cliff above.

"Miss Macdonald," he asked, "do you ever associate certain people with certain flowers?"

"Oh, yes; very often. At once, when I saw Renee, she reminded me of a beautiful blush-rose, the leaves a little crumpled, but only waiting for the morning sun to open out into perfect beauty."

"After that comparison, I hardly like to tell you what I was thinking about. But to me you always seem like this wild flower, and I never shall see the mountain-heather without recalling your image to my mind."

I took the spray out of his hand and fastened it in my dress.

"Will you always keep it?" he inquired.

"Yes; I think I will."

"Do; and oh, Hester, believe me, no matter what lovely flowers I may find on my path, this one shall always be my favorite."

CHAPTER V.

SHE stood just inside the casement of the large open window, the bright sunshine falling on her rippling brown hair, her gaze fixed dreamily on the blue peaks of the distant mountains, and her slender white hands lying listlessly on her black dress. Behind her hung the light, chintz curtains, against which the outline of her beautifully-formed figure stood out in full relief.

I saw the look of surprise and admiration which passed over my companion's face as we paused to watch her in the court outside.

"You were right," he whispered. "She is the lovely blush-rose."

"And I am the heather," I thought, "simple and homely, but always to remain the favorite."

We went in together. Renee turned her head as we entered the room.

"Will you introduce me to your cousin, Miss Macdonald?" Mr. Cowper said.

Only a few minutes before he had called me "Hester," and I had been wondering whether he would return again to the formal mode of address.

Renee bowed in acknowledgment of the introduction, which I fear I performed rather awkwardly. Then I left the room to tell Elsbeth that she might bring in luncheon.

When I returned Renee was still standing by the window, Mr. Cowper beside her. There

was no lack of animation now; the thoughtful look had vanished, and her eyes were raised laughingly to his. The change of expression made her look even more beautiful; but, somehow, I did not like her quite so much as I had done before.

That night I stood longer than usual before the mirror. The knowledge that the face which it reflected had no claim whatever to beauty—that the eyes, large, soft and brown, were the only good feature—had never troubled me before. Now I turned away, with something like a sigh, as I compared myself with my lovely cousin.

More than a fortnight passed, but Renee and I did not make much advance toward friendship.

I generally found her silent and reserved when alone with me. She rarely alluded to her past life, nor could I discover whether she was content with her new home.

My father seemed rather to like her; and, to my surprise she was quite at ease with him from the very first. She would talk to him at meals—almost the only time which he spent in our society—and he never gave her any of the short, impatient answers which I nearly always received whenever I attempted to engage him in conversation.

But if my father liked Renee, Elsbeth did not.

"Depend on it, there is more under the surface than she cares to show," she said to me a few days after her arrival. "And, if I am not very much mistaken, there is but one person in the world whom it is possible for her to love, and that person is herself."

"Oh, Elsbeth, you are too hard on her!" I exclaimed. "And I mean to make her like me before long."

"You will never do that, Miss Hester," Elsbeth answered.

"I wish you would tell me something about your home in France, Renee."

We were walking along the head of the cliffs together, and I was determined to do my best to induce her to take me a little into her confidence at last.

"Why do you want to know?" she asked, almost sharply, looking hard at me.

I felt confused, and did not reply.

"Curiosity, I suppose," she said, with a laugh, which grated strangely on my ear.

"No, indeed, Renee!" I answered. "But I want so much to be your friend."

"No, Hester; that you could hardly be. You, brought up like a Puritan in this corner of the world, could never understand me. My home, indeed! I never had one. All my life I have been knocking about the world; but somehow I always managed to fall on my feet,

and hope to do so to the end of the chapter. How would you like to see me a great actress, Hester?"

"Renee, are you in earnest?"

"Do not look so shocked. Do you think I intend to wear out my life in humdrum monotony? I mean to have a position in the world yet; and, if the mountain does not come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain. But, hush! Here is Mr. Cowper coming toward us. Don't think any more about what I said of the stage; of course, it was all nonsense."

Mr. Cowper joined us just then.

I could not forget Renee's last speech, and was more silent than usual.

With Mr. Cowper, as with my father, Renee generally engrossed the principal part of the conversation, and he, too, seemed to enjoy talking to her.

This day, more than ever, I felt neglected and unnoticed. Not that his manner to me had changed perceptibly, but I could not but feel that I had been more to him before Renee's arrival.

"What a glorious view!" I exclaimed, as we paused on the highest point along that line of coast, several hundred feet above the sea.

"Glorious, indeed!" said Mr. Cowper. "Mountain, sea, and cliff—what wonderful, yet what sublime confusion! Look, Miss Renee! Did you ever see anything more beautiful than that rich, warm light on those black, rugged rocks yonder?"

"More beautiful!"—and she laughed bitterly—"I call it all wild, terrible—grand, perhaps—but beautiful, never! Give me, instead, one glimpse of the sunny hills and plains of my beautiful France, and I would never ask to see Scotland again!"

"Nature is fair everywhere," he said, quietly, "and you will soon learn to like Scotland better than now you do."

"Like it—this cold, dismal land! Not likely, I assure you. Only think, in two days it will be the first of June—the month of roses—and I doubt if I shall see so much as a single bud!"

"We will not let you miss the roses, Miss Renee," he said.

But she did not answer.

The first of June dawned bright and cloudless.

The sunshine, streaming into my room, awoke me at a little after five.

I sprung out of bed, dressed as quickly as possible, and was soon walking briskly along through the balmy morning air.

A walk of a little more than an hour brought me to a sheltered, wooded dale, where, in a

few minutes, I found the object of my early expedition—a clump of wild rose-bushes.

They were not yet in blossom as I had hoped; however, I succeeded in finding some half-dozen buds—one or two pure white, the others delicately tinged with pink.

"I am sorry they are not better; but I am sure these will please her," I thought, as I placed them in a little basket and started on my homeward way.

Two figures were standing near the Castle gate as I approached, which I soon recognized to be Renee and Mr. Cowper.

In one hand she held what looked like a wooden box about a foot square, while the other was clasped in his.

His head was bent over hers until it almost touched her hair, and he seemed to be speaking earnestly and eagerly. Then she turned, and walked toward the Castle, and he strode along in the direction of the beach.

I felt glad that he did not come toward me, as I did not want to meet him just then.

"Where have you been so early, Hester?" asked Renee, coming to the door of her room as I was passing it on my way to mine. But, without waiting for an answer to her question, she added, "Will you come in here? I have something lovely to show you."

The box which I had seen in her hand was lying on the table; and, raising the lid, she took out one after another a number of the most exquisite roses I had ever seen.

No two were alike, and there seemed to be one of almost every shade, from the purest white to the deepest crimson.

"Mr. Cowper gave them to you?" I inquired, trying to keep down the lump which rose in my throat.

"Yes. Only think! he telegraphed to a florist to send them at once, so as to be able to bring them to me this morning, and as soon as they fade I am to have more. I am not to be a single day this month without my roses, he says."

"He is certainly very kind," I murmured.

"Yes; but he says that he felt far happier than I could have done, because he saw I was so pleased. This is the one he asked me to wear to-day."

And, taking up a half-open blush rosebud, she fastened it in her breast.

"Now let me choose one for you, Hester. This is a beauty. I will pin it for you."

"No, thank you," I answered, almost roughly; "I do not care about wearing flowers."

"As you please. I am sorry you will not take it. Is this basket yours? What have you covered up so carefully under those leaves?"

"Nothing of any consequence."

And, taking it out of her hand, I hurried from the room.

Poor little spray of heather, dry, faded, almost crumbling into dust. I looked at it, and thought of the roses.

Was it still the favorite flower, I asked myself? If not, the answer to that question revealed the whole truth. I saw plainly now what I had only vaguely guessed before. I loved this man; nay, more than loved—worshiped, adored him.

Silently and unperceived the subtle poison had crept into my being, lulling it to sleep in a delicious dream.

I had gone on from hour to hour, from day to day enjoying the happiness of the moment without a single thought of the future, or asking myself whither all this was leading.

Now my dream was at an end, and bitter indeed was the awakening. There seemed no hope, no escape for me. Life would go on as before—life, out of which all the sunshine had disappeared.

"Not quite twenty yet," I thought, "and may still have fifty years or more to live, and all that time shall love him just as much as I do now. Perhaps he will sometimes give me a kind word or look, or even speak of the time when we used to be such friends."

Could not Renee have left him to me? Beautiful and winning, could she not be content to wait for some of the many whom fate had doubtless decreed should bow the knee before her? Why had she come between me and the only man who could ever be anything to me?

Why, indeed—did she love him? Perhaps she did; but certainly not with a love such as mine. And while I thought that, it was very hard not to hate Renee with a fierce, jealous hatred.

Some one knocked at my door. It was Elizabeth, who came to know why I was not going down to breakfast.

"I do not want any; I had some before I went out," I answered, heedless of the untruth.

And, to my great relief, she went away satisfied.

Before long I heard some one at the door again. This time it was Renee, asking if she might come in.

"What do you want?" I asked, without unlocking the door.

"Mr. Cowper is here. He wants to go for a walk. Will you come?"

"No; I was out this morning. I am too tired."

"Very well; good-by."

And I heard her singing gayly as she ran along the passage.

A few minutes later I saw them crossing the court together; and, with a bitter, tearless

sob, I flung myself on my bed, lost to everything save a sense of my own misery.

Gradually one idea forced itself on my mind. As yet no one knew my secret; and, if I could help it, none should ever know it. None should suspect that I had given my love unasked, and that it had been refused.

I must soon meet them, I knew. In half an hour they would return to luncheon, and I would talk and laugh, and look quite as happy as they, and they should never guess what a scorching flood of anguish had just swept over me, leaving my life crushed, blighted and worthless.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ordeal was over, the first meeting past, and I was again alone with my misery.

I had acted my part well, without flinching or even changing color; but, oh, it was very difficult to appear calm and indifferent while his every look, his every tone showed how passionately he loved her.

"They will never think of looking for me here," I thought, as I climbed up to the little turret chamber in which I had told Mr. Cawper the legend of Edith Macdonald.

"Had Edith loved Lord Ronald as I loved that man?" I wondered. "Oh, if he had but deceived and wronged me, and returned penitently to implore forgiveness, could I have asked for greater happiness than to gather up the crumbs of a love, uncertain and wavering indeed, but at last mine, and mine alone?"

I heard a quick step on the stairs. Who was coming to invade my solitude? Could they not leave me in peace for a few hours?

"Hester, are you there?"

It was Harry Bolton's voice. I had heard that he was to return the evening before, but had forgotten all about him. I felt cold and sick. I could not look up nor speak, but held out my hand in silence.

"Elsbeth told me that she believed you were here," he said; "and I thought I might venture to follow. I wanted so much to see you. However, if I am disturbing you, I will go away again."

"Yes; do, please," trembled on my lips; but glancing at him, I saw how sad and pained he looked, and could not send him away like that.

"There is room for you here. Will you not sit down?" I said.

He did not wait for a second invitation, but placed himself beside me on the window-sill, for furniture the room had none.

"What is the matter with you, Hester?" he asked, after some minutes' silence, laying his hand on mine.

"Nothing," I answered, snatching my hand away.

"I know you too well to believe that, Hester."

"Harry, I will not bear this from you! What right have you to come here to question and tease me, I should like to know? I tell you I am as well and as happy as ever I was in my life!"

I tried to meet his look steadily; but there was an expression in it which told me that though I might deceive others, I could never deceive him.

"Will you not tell me your trouble, dear?" he said, gently. "Treat me as you used when we were like brother and sister together."

There was something so kind and affectionate in his voice, and my poor aching heart was so longing for sympathy, that, yielding to the impulse of the moment, I laid my head on his shoulder, and sobbed bitterly.

"Oh, Harry," I moaned, "if you would only be my brother! I have wanted you so badly to care for me like that; and I am so wretched, so lonely!"

"Poor little Hester, you shall never repent having trusted me. But if any one has been playing false with you—"

"Hush, Harry! No one has."

"Are you telling me the truth, Hester?"

"Indeed, I am! I—I have made a fool of myself, that is all."

I knew that I had betrayed my secret, but did not care; and Harry was so noble, so kind. Not a word of reproach, not an allusion to his own hopes, which, like mine, had been cruelly dashed to the ground.

And as we sat and talked, freely and unrereservedly as of old, I almost forgot that he had ever cared for me otherwise than as his sister.

"Am I to congratulate you, Hester?" asked Renee, as she followed me into my room that night.

"Congratulate me! Why so?"

"About Harry Bolton, of course. You must be very glad to have him back again. I am sure you and he will suit each other famously."

"Stop, if you please, Renee! There is nothing whatever between Harry and me. We are great friends, but we never can be anything more."

She gave me a peculiar, searching look.

"I am very sorry to hear you say so," she said. "He seems a very nice kind of young man. But I had almost forgotten to tell you a piece of news. I am engaged to Mr. Cawper."

"I wish you joy," I said, speaking calmly, as though every word were not an almost unbearable torture. "I trust you may be happy with him, Renee."

"Thanks, Hester! I am sure you mean what you say. But, to tell the honest truth, I do not feel quite content with myself, now that

I begin to think over what I have done. He is very nice and amiable, and all that, and of course, I like him very much, or I should not have accepted him; still I feel that if I had waited a little longer, I might have done better."

"Renee!"

My white lips could utter no more.

"How shocked you look!" she laughed. "But I am not one of those romantic girls who fancy that love in a cottage constitutes the sum-total of happiness. You see, I am terribly matter-of-fact. I think I told you once that I meant to win a position in the world for myself; and now I have promised to marry an artist, with only about three or four hundred a-year. However, the poor fellow is desperately in love with me. You should have seen him when I told him that I would have nothing whatever to do with him. I almost meant it at the time, only he begged and prayed so for just a little love, that I had to give in at last."

And in this strain Renee continued to talk, making light of the love she had so easily won, her every word giving a fresh stab to my poor, stricken heart.

Next morning I met Mr. Cowper alone. Never expecting to find him at the Castle so early, I went into the drawing-room a few minutes after breakfast to fetch some work which I had forgotten there.

He was standing before the window, and came forward to meet me with the same cordial, friendly smile, which used to make me feel so happy. Now the room seemed to swim round me, and my lips trembled so that I could hardly speak.

"I will tell her that you are here," I said, faintly.

"Wait one moment; I have brought something to show you. How do you like these?" and he pointed to two small oil paintings which were lying on the table.

One represented a wild, heaving sea, heavy storm-clouds, here and there gleams of lurid light, and one solitary figure standing on the shore—a woman with disheveled hair, and dress drenched with rain and spray, and bending before the wind, while the agonized look on her face showed that within, as well as without, a tempest was raging.

Strange fancy of Mr. Cowper to give that woman my features! I looked at the other picture. It was exactly the same view, but, oh, how different! Bright, smooth water, of the deepest, clearest blue, bathed in a flood of golden sunshine. Leaning against a rock stood a girl, fair and young, her brow as cloudless as the sky, and a blush rose nestling among the coils of her rich brown hair.

"I want you to accept these pictures, Miss Macdonald," said Mr. Cowper. "Will you keep them in remembrance of our friendship?"

"Thank you; but—"

"No buts, if you please. I said that I was going to paint something for you, and you told me I might."

"You are very kind. I am greatly obliged to you."

"Why do you look so grave? You surely are not vexed at my using your countenance as a model for 'Storm'?"

"Why should I be vexed?"

"I hardly know. I thought, perhaps, you might be. I think your face could look just like that; but Heaven grant it never may!"

It had looked just like that, but he should never know it!

"Miss Macdonald, has Renee told you anything?" he asked.

The question was so quick and sudden that I started violently and changed color.

"Yes," was all that I could say.

"And will you not wish me joy?"

"With all my heart!"

"I can hardly believe my happiness to be real, Hester." The sound of my name, probably uttered unconsciously, was like a cruel wound, but his head was turned away, and he did not see how I shuddered. "She reaches the perfect ideal of everything a woman ought to be; and loves me with all her heart. I have not much to offer her, but she is far too noble and pure to care for the tawdry prizes offered by the world of fashion and folly. But hush! I hear her coming—*my Renee!*"

She was already at the door. He hurried to meet her, and while he stood with both her hands clasped in his, gazing fondly on her, I took up my pictures, and crept out of the room.

Harry kept his word nobly, and what I should have done without his friendship during the time which followed, I hardly know. In all our walks he was my constant companion, thus saving me from the painful necessity of forming a third with Renee and Mr. Cowper; but never by word or look did he remind me that he knew my miserable secret.

How much Elsbeth guessed or knew of the true state of affairs I did not know; she was even more kind and affectionate than usual, but the shadow which had fallen between us did not disappear.

Meanwhile my father seemed to take very little interest in our movements. He had told Renee that he fully approved of her choice, and after that rarely alluded to the subject; but Mr. Cowper seemed to have fallen considerably in his good opinion since he had discovered that

the gentleman preferred her society to the study of natural philosophy.

"Where are you going, Hester?" asked Renee, one morning, as she met me at the entrance door.

"I am going to the graveyard."

"Why, what can you possibly want there?"

"It is my mother's birthday," I answered, in a low voice, "and I want to go to her grave. I always do."

"May I accompany you?"

"Yes, if you wish it," I answered, feeling that I could not refuse, though I would far rather have been alone.

Few words passed between us as we walked down the hillside and through the little village.

"I hope you do not mind my coming with you?" Renee said, as I pushed open the churchyard gate.

"No," I answered, feeling at the same time that I was not quite speaking the truth.

We stood by the grave together.

"Aged nineteen," read Renee. "How thankful you ought to be that she died while still young and happy. She had not time to grow tired of life. When I think of my mother—" and she sighed heavily.

That was the first time she had ever spoken of her to me.

"Did you love her very much?" I asked, rather timidly.

"Love! I worshiped—adored her! Oh, Hester! if you could only have seen her; she was so perfectly lovely, and what a glorious life she led until she met my father! If she had remained on the stage then she would have been famous now, but when she was just eighteen he saw her, and won her with his smooth, false tongue. She gave up all—friends, fame, ambition for his sake, and what was her reward? Soon he tired of her, but she loved him to the last. He used to tell her that he had disgraced his family by marrying an actress, and yet she had to take an engagement in a theater to support them. I have heard him throw her low birth in her teeth, and then put the money she had earned into his pocket to spend on his own pleasures, when she had hardly enough left to buy food and clothes for herself and child. She was so weak and ill that she had scarcely strength to get through her parts. Shall I ever forget the day before she died? I was just fifteen then, and very old for my years. She told me that the end was near, and did all she could to comfort me. Then she made me promise to try to love my father, and to remember that my first duty was to honor and obey him. Honor him I could not; obey him I did. Yes, I have kept my promise to her; have given up the hope, the joy, the ambition of my life at his command. Oh, Hester! If you

only knew how I have fought and struggled with myself!" And, resting her head on my shoulder, she began to sob bitterly.

I was utterly amazed. Never had I supposed that Renee, whom I had believed so light-hearted and careless, could speak thus.

"Your trials are our own," I said. "Think of the happiness before you."

"Happiness!" she exclaimed, dashing away her tears. "What happiness is there in store for me, I should like to know?"

"Oh, Renee, think how he loves you!"

She turned away from me, and, sitting down on the grave, rested her head on her hand.

"I often wonder whether I have a heart at all," she said; but I cannot care for people as they care for me. Love is supposed to make a woman's life perfect. There you are, for instance. You will love some one before long, I suppose; life will then seem full of charm, and you will ask for nothing but to live on from year's end to year's end, as a good wife, mother, and housekeeper. I could not exist like that. If Mr. Cowper had but chosen you, and left me free!"

"Renee, are you mad? Do you really mean what you say?"

"There, now; I have shocked you again!" The excited, passionate tone was gone, and she was her old self again. "Could two girls be more different to each other than you and I, I wonder? I hardly think it possible. But how long do you intend to remain here? Is it not time to go?"

"Would you mind returning alone, Renee? I should like to stop here a little longer."

"Oh, no! Nothing can happen to me between this and the Castle. Good-by for the present!"

And, humming a gay French song, she sauntered down the walk.

I was more puzzled than ever. Would it at any time be possible to understand Renee? Was there more under the surface than I had given her credit for? How strangely good and evil seemed blended in her nature; how passionate her affection for her mother; how uncertain her love for the man whom she had promised to marry!

When I returned to the Castle they were together in the drawing-room—Mr. Cowper devoted as usual; Renee apparently in the highest spirits.

"Tell me, are you ever sad, Renee?" he said, taking little notice of my entrance.

"Not often; only now and then, by way of a change. But you should have been with us an hour or two ago. Hester and I were moralizing in the most philosophical manner possible."

"Indeed! May I inquire what was the subject?"

"Oh, human life, of course; and we came to

the conclusion that there is a great deal of happiness to be found in the world, after all, if we only know where and how to look for it."

"I have found more than happiness, Renee," he answered, bending over her, and speaking in a low voice—not too low, however, for me to hear. "I have found bliss so perfect, so unutterable, that I sometimes fear that it cannot be real—that a cruel awakening must come sooner or later."

"Are you afraid that your idol has 'feet of clay,' after all?" she asked, with a quiet laugh.

"No, Renee, no; you will always be perfect to me," he answered, earnestly; but I remembered our conversation by the grave, and I thought that, could he have overheard it, he would have discovered "the feet of clay."

I did not care to remain there any longer, and left the room. A little boy from the village was standing in the hall.

"Do you want anything?" I asked.

"If you please, miss, did you drop this?"

And he held out a small gold locket.

I touched the spring, and it flew open. There was a miniature painting inside, the likeness of a young man, with rather handsome features; yet there was something in the countenance which I did not like.

"Does it belong to you, miss?" asked the child.

"No; it is not mine; but perhaps my cousin lost it. Go down to the kitchen, and I will ask her."

I was going to take it to her; but the thought occurred to me that she might not wish Mr. Cowper to see it, so I called her out into the hall.

"This was picked up in the village," I said, placing the locket in her hand. "Does it belong to you?"

I thought that she was going to faint; for every hue of color left her, and she sunk down on the chair beside her.

"Who found it?" she asked.

"Some little boy."

"Has any one else seen it?"

"I hardly know. I think not. He only gave it to me this minute."

"Hester, go and tell Mr. Cowper I have a headache, or give him any other excuse you like. I cannot go back to him just now."

"Are you ill?"

"Do not worry me with questions. Can you not do as I ask?"

She rose, and went up-stairs, and I told Mr. Cowper that she was engaged, and could not be seen for the present.

I did not meet Renee again until dinner-time. She was much paler than usual, and I thought that I could detect traces of tears.

"Hester," she said, "I want you to promise

never to say anything about that lock to any one."

"Very well."

"Never to speak of it again—not even to me."

"Certainly not, if you do not wish it," I answered.

But I did not forget the occurrence.

CHAPTER VII.

"HESTER, I have come to show you my dress; is it not perfection? Do I not make a charming *Laura*?"

And Renee surveyed herself in the mirror with a look of great satisfaction.

"Your dress is beautiful," I said; "but, Renee, believe me, you ought really to give up those theatricals."

"Give up the theatricals! Are you mad? And what would they all think of me? Mr. St. John says they could not get on without me at all, for no one else could take that part."

"Have you forgotten what Mr. Cowper said in his letter this morning?"

"That absurd letter! I am sorry I showed it to you at all! The idea of his telling me that he did not wish me to have anything whatever to do with the theatricals!"

"He will be very angry, I am sure!"

"I can't help it if he is. And it is quite time to show him that I have not the least idea of being his obedient slave. It is most unreasonable of him not to wish me to enjoy myself."

"If you really cared for him, it would give you no pleasure to do what you knew he disliked."

"Rubbish! But I see Mr. St. John coming. I will go down and ask him if my dress is quite right."

And with another survey of herself in the glass, she left the room.

Nearly three months had passed since Renee's engagement to Mr. Cowper, and as yet he had not discovered that she was not all he fondly supposed her to be.

I saw how his love for her strengthened from day to day, blinding him to her faults, and making him the willing slave of her many whims and caprices; but until to-day I never knew how lightly she valued that love.

About a fortnight ago, business had called him to London, and he had not yet returned. However, his absence seemed to trouble Renee very little, as she found plenty to amuse herself with in another quarter, Mr. St. John and a large party of friends having arrived for the shooting season.

Game was unusually scarce this year, and soon all but a few indefatigable sportsmen laid by their guns in disgust, and began to look out for a better way of passing their time.

Mr. St. John's shooting-box, as it was called, was in reality a tolerably large and commodious country house, at about half a mile from the Castle.

He had induced some ladies to join his party—his aunt, with her two pretty, lively daughters, his sister, a dashing young widow, and the wives of two or three of the gentlemen.

The weather was glorious, and not a day passed without some excursion or pleasure-party, in which it soon became a recognized thing that we should take part.

Then private theatricals were proposed, and the idea gave general satisfaction.

The public were to be admitted on payment of a small entrance fee, and the proceeds were to be distributed among the poor.

Renee had mentioned the theatricals, in writing, to Mr. Cowper; and in reply he had begged, almost commanded her not to take any part in them.

But his wishes had little weight with her, and she was determined not to deny herself the pleasure of acting.

The principal role had been allotted to her. She was to be *Laura*, the heroine of the play; and Mr. St. John her devoted lover.

In about half an hour, I heard Renee coming up-stairs.

She entered my room without knocking, as usual.

"Will you help me to take off this dress?" she said. "Some of the people from the shooting-box are going out boating, and will call for us in a few minutes; so we must make haste."

I wondered whether it was the idea of the boating party, and her eagerness to be ready in time, which made her hands tremble, and gave such an unwonted glow to her cheeks.

The evening on which the theatricals were to take place arrived. Harry Bolton was one of the actors, but no part had been offered me, it never occurring to any one to suppose that I could possibly possess any dramatic talent.

Still, I had been very busy all day, helping with the arrangements.

Two large rooms, opening into each other by folding doors, had to be fitted up—one as the stage, the other for the audience. And it was only just as the hour at which the doors were to be opened struck, that everything was finished.

Glad to be able to sit down at last, I secured a corner place, and dreamily watched the spectators arrive.

They consisted principally of the neighboring farmers, with their wives and daughters, the shopkeepers from the village, and Mr. St. John's servants.

"An interesting set of people for ladies and gentleman to act before, certainly!" said a

well-known voice beside me, and looking round, I saw Mr. Cowper leaning over my chair.

"You here!" I exclaimed, greatly surprised.
"When did you arrive?"

"Only about an hour ago. I went at once to the Castle, and Elisbeth told me that I should find you here. But where is Renee?"

"You will see her presently."

"She is not in there, certainly?"

And he pointed to the curtain which concealed the stage.

"She is."

"And she is to act?"

"Yes."

"Let me get this chair in beside you, Miss Macdonald. I want to talk to you. Now, tell me, do you know whether she received a letter from me the day before yesterday?"

"Yes, she did."

"And in that letter I told her plainly that I did not wish her to act."

"Do not be too hard on her, Mr. Cowper. She had promised before that letter came. They could hardly have managed this piece without her, and she did not like to disappoint."

"But why did she promise in the first place? She knew perfectly well what my feelings on the subject were."

"How could she?"

"We were talking about theatricals one day, and I told her what a dislike I had to them. She could not possibly have forgotten that."

"Perhaps she had; do not condemn her unheard. But hush; they are going to raise the curtain."

Something like a muttered curse fell from Mr. Cowper's lips as the stage was revealed to our view.

Reclining in an arm-chair, looking wonderfully beautiful in her cloudy gauze dress, lay *Laura*, listening to the passionate professions of love made by the young man, who was kneeling beside her.

I had never liked the play. Perhaps my ideas were prudish and old-fashioned, as Renee often laughingly told me, but I could not conquer my dislike to see my cousin going through the farce of a clandestine intrigue and elopement with Mr. St. John, for the amusement of any one who chose to pay a shilling to watch her. What did Mr. Cowper think of it? I wondered, and glanced at him.

His look startled me—so fixed and rigid; and yet I could not but feel that it was the calm of suppressed passion, which might break forth at any moment.

Renee, evidently, did not see him until toward the close of the first act, when, kneeling before her father, she begged his pardon for her secret marriage. Then she turned her

head, and saw him watching her. She started slightly, and her color came and went, but her agitation only lasted for one moment; the next she had lost her identity in the character which she was representing.

The curtain fell; thunders of applause filled the room, and *Laura* was called on to reappear, which she did, bowing and smiling, her hand resting on Mr. St. John's arm.

Her triumph was complete; every one acknowledged that her acting had been perfect, and that a professional could hardly have surpassed her.

"Will you not come to her?" I said to Mr. Cowper; it was the first time that I had ventured to speak to him since the commencement of the play.

"Meet her to-night! No; I am not sufficiently master of myself. Tell her that she may expect to see me to-morrow morning." And without even wishing me good-night, he hurried away.

Harry Bolton and Mr. St. John walked home with us. I could think of nothing but of Mr. Cowper, and wonder what he would say to Renee in the morning.

"Why are you so silent, Hester?" Harry asked. "I am afraid you have not been enjoying yourself."

"Not very much, to tell the truth."

"That's too bad. But, by the way, how do you think I got on? They all seemed to think that I did very fairly."

His had been a very minor part—only a clerk in a registry office. I had not once noticed him, but did not like to say so, and answered evasively.

"You know that I am not a judge of that kind of thing, but I am sure you were quite as good as any of the others."

"I am glad you think so. And so Mr. Cowper has come back! I saw him sitting near you."

"Yes; he returned this evening."

"Is he displeased that she has acted? He looked out of sorts. I don't think he even waited to speak to her afterward."

"I can tell you nothing whatever about him," I answered, shortly. For though I could now mention Mr. Cowper's name without an effort, I could not speak to Harry about his love for Renee.

"Hester," said Renee, passing her arm through mine, when we had wished the gentlemen good-night, "did Mr. Cowper say anything to you about me? Of course he was talking to you."

"He said very little."

"Is he very angry?"

"I am afraid he is."

"So am I. Oh, how he did scowl at me!" And she shuddered. "Tell me more about

him," she continued, following me into my room. "Was he long there?"

"He came in just before the play commenced."

"How thankful I am I did not see him until the end! I could never have got through if I had known he was watching me."

"He told me to tell you that he was coming to see you in the morning."

"Did he?"

She spoke carelessly, but I saw how her hand trembled as she unfastened her cloak.

"Oh, Renee, do you know that you have Mr. St. John's pearl necklace on still?" I exclaimed.

She drew her cloak hastily over it, and gave a forced, awkward laugh.

"Did you forget to return it to Mr. St. John?" I asked.

"No. After all, I may as well tell you the truth. I thought he was only lending me the necklace, and I was very glad to have it. You know it was the thing for *Laura* to wear pearls, and I had none. But when I wanted to return it to him, he refused to take it; said that it was a present, and that he had got it on purpose to give me."

"But, Renee, you surely do not intend to keep it?"

"I must. If I say any thing more I shall offend him."

"But, Renee—"

"Really, Hester, you are very tiresome. Is there any thing very wrong in a girl's taking a present from a gentleman?"

"I don't think an engaged girl ought; and what will Mr. Cowper say to it?"

"Mr. Cowper!—always Mr. Cowper, until I am sick of hearing his name! I tell you, you will soon make me hate the man. What is it to him if Mr. St. John chooses to give me a few pearls?"

"I know he would not like it."

"I don't care. I wish I had never seen him, that I had never had any thing to do with him!—and if he dares to lecture me, I shall just tell him so."

"No, no; you cannot be in earnest?"

"I am!"

And she left the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

"DON'T I look like a naughty child, waiting for a scolding?" laughed Renee, next morning. "I wonder if I am to be put in the corner, with my face to the wall, or what my punishment will be!"

I could not laugh; I felt strangely, unaccountably miserable—haunted by a presentiment that something serious was going to happen.

"I see him coming!" Renee exclaimed. "I

wil go into the drawing-room, and be the first in the field! Now, my gentleman, you shall soon discover that I have a will of my own!"

I heard Mr. Cowper's voice in the hall, asking Elsbeth if he could see Miss Renee; then he went into the drawing-room, and shut the door.

About an hour afterward, Renee brushed past me on the stairs, and went into her own room.

I hesitated for a few minutes as to whether I should follow her, but thinking that she might wish to be alone, went down to the drawing-room.

I supposed that Mr. Cowper had gone, but as I opened the door met him.

"Hester," he said, hoarsely, "I want to speak to you—perhaps you can explain all this to me?"

He began to pace the room with hasty, uneven strides, while I stood by the window, waiting and trembling.

Suddenly he stopped before me, and, looking closely, almost fiercely, at me, said, "Hester, tell me the truth—did Renee love me when she promised to marry me, or did she not?"

I could not truthfully say "Yes;" I dared not say "No."

"Tell me," he demanded again, his features working, his eyes flashing; "or was she only playing with me from the very first?"

"Please do not ask me; how could I know?"

"You could, and you do know. You knew all along that she never cared for me. You let her deceive me, without giving me one word of warning. Hester, was that fair or just of you?"

"What could I have done?"

"You should have told me what she really was, instead of letting me find it out, like this."

"Would you have believed me, Mr. Cowper?"

He turned quickly away, and began to pace the room once more. Then coming up to me again, said, in a low, broken voice, "You must forgive me, Hester; but I hardly know what I am saying. You cannot think what it is to love madly, desperately, as I have done, and have your passion scorned and trampled on. In this very room, on that very spot, she swore that she loved me; on that very spot, not ten minutes ago, she told me that I was nothing whatever to her. So much for the blind fool who gives his happiness into the keeping of a woman!"

"Perhaps she did not mean it. She may be sorry now; I will go and speak to her."

"No; do not. Even if she were to come and kneel before me, and beg and pray of me to forgive her, I would not do it."

"You think so; but if she were here it would be different."

"It would not. After what she said just now there can never be any thing more between us. Am I to marry a girl who persists in doing that of which she well knows I have the greatest horror? And not only so, but who dares me to prevent her doing it a second time? I never told you or her before, but the knowledge that her mother had been an actress was agony to me. Renee has inherited her love for the stage, and told me that she would far rather take an engagement at a theater than become my wife, unless I promised to let her gratify that passion. But that is not all. I left her for a couple of weeks, believing that she would think of me and miss me. How does she pass the time?—by flirting with another man! When I accused her of her falseness, she could not deny it—but she did not even attempt to offer an apology for her conduct. They walked home together last night, and I watched them. You and Bolton were on in front, and could not see how she hung on his arm, and let him hold her hand in his. Enough! Oh, that I could forget the past, and be the man I was three months ago; but that can never be!"

"Forgetfulness will come in time," I said. "We must all learn how to suffer."

"Yes, it is the lot of every human creature, I suppose; but it is painful to have all the brightness suddenly swept out of one's life. And now I must say good-by. I am going away at once, and can never return to this place so long as she is here. You will not quite forget me, Hester—you will sometimes think of those happy days when we used to be such friends!"

"I will not forget you. You may be sure of that."

"Thank you for the promise; and now, before I go, let me ask you one question. Often, lately, I have fancied that you had some secret trouble; that you were not the same happy, light-hearted girl as when first I knew you. Am I right?"

I tried to answer, but no words would come.

"Hester,"—and he took my hand in his—"tell me what is wrong, and perhaps I can help you. Probably, it is the last request I shall ever make."

"I cannot—it is impossible!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Please do not say anything more about it."

"Of course you know best; but I am sorry you will not trust me. Good-by, and Heaven bless you!"

He drew me close to him, and I felt his lips pressed to my forehead. Then he was gone—gone in grief and anger—his love scorned and trampled on, his most sacred feelings wounded, his trust and confidence in women lost forever.

And I sat alone—I, who would have died for him. My love for him a bitter, humiliating secret. But that secret was mine still, and he should never know it.

"Hester, what is the matter?"

The voice roused me; and raising my head, I saw my cousin standing beside me, bright and gay as ever, not a shadow of the cloud which she had cast over another's life resting on her fair brow.

"Oh, Renee," I exclaimed, "how could you? What have you done?"

"You mean about Mr. Cowper, I suppose," she answered. "That gentleman seems to trouble you far more than he does me. Well, he and I have had a regular quarrel, that is all. I dare say he will sulk for some time before he will try to make it up again."

"He will not try to make it up again, Renee. He means never to see you again."

"How do you know?"

"He told me so just now."

"Are you quite sure he is in earnest?"

"I have not a doubt of it."

For some time she did not speak. Her back was turned toward me, and I could not see her visage. Then she said, slowly, "And so it is all at an end between us! Poor fellow, I am really very sorry for him; he was so fond of me. But, we never should have suited each other; and I am glad that he has found it out in good time. I suppose he will let me know what I am to do with his letters and presents."

"Probably."

Weeks ago I had given up the idea of ever learning to love Renee. At this moment I almost hated her—so utterly heartless, so indifferent to the sorrow which he was inflicting on others. And yet it was this girl who had crushed the life of Herbert Cowper; this girl, but for whose fatal beauty he might have—But I dared not let myself think of what might have been had not she come between us.

And yet I could not forget that the heather had once been the favorite flower.

"Is it not nearly time for you to dress, Hester?" Renee said.

"Dress? Why so?"

"Do you not remember, we are to go to the shooting-box to luncheon. Make haste, or we shall be late."

"I do not intend to go."

"Why not?"

"I do not care about any of the people there, and I know that they do not care about me."

"Nonsense! Do, please, come; I do not like the idea of going alone, and you know Harry Bolton will be there."

"What is that to me?"

"I thought it was a great deal," she laughed, meaningly.

"Renee, please do not speak of Harry like that."

"Well, you certainly are a strange girl. You let him waste all his time with you, and then are furious if any remark is made. You take it upon yourself to tell me that I have treated Mr. Cowper very badly; may I inquire whether it is treating Harry Bolton well to encourage him as you do if you mean nothing by it? However, that is your affair and not mine. Do not think that I wish to interfere. Good-by; I am going by myself, as you are so cross and disagreeable."

A gulf seemed to open at my feet; I felt like one who could neither advance nor retreat.

Was Renee right? Had I been treating Harry badly? Had he still any hopes that the time would yet come when I should learn to care for him? If so, he had never once betrayed himself. Never had he alluded to any feeling warmer than that of friendship for me since the day when I had told him that friendship was all that I could give him.

I tried to forget Renee's accusation, but in vain. Thinking over this new difficulty, wondering how I ought to act toward him in future, I wandered down to the beach, to the spot fraught with so many recollections for me.

What would my life have been had I not come down here that evening to watch the storm? I wondered. Then I might never have met him; and perhaps Harry—Whose step was that behind me?

I turned my head to look. It was Harry Bolton, who had almost reached my side.

"Why, Harry," I exclaimed, "I thought you were at Mr. St. John's!"

"I did intend to go, because I thought you would be there."

The remembrance of what Renee had said, more than the words and the way in which they were uttered, sent the color to my cheeks.

"Yes," he continued, speaking in those eager, excited tones which I had not heard from him for so long; "do you think that I could possibly enjoy myself among all those people, when you were not there? Hester, until now I have faithfully kept the promise I made you months ago. All that time I have waited and hoped, for I felt sure that, sooner or later, love such as mine must win its proper return. Tell me that I am right—that I have not been deceiving myself by thinking that you have at last learned to care for me a little."

"Harry, stop; you must not speak like that!"

"I will not stop! I have broken the ice between us, and you must hear me out. Oh, Hester, do you not know that I have loved

you for years—all my life, I think, and have always looked on you as mine? I do not ask for a great deal; only for the right to love you, and make you happy. I know I could do that, Hester. The business of my life should be to please you. Do I not know you better than you know yourself? Can I not read your slightest wish before you utter it? You are going to say 'yes,' darling. You must, you shall; I will take no refusal!"

He had seized my hand, and was trying to draw me toward him, but I shrunk back.

"I cannot, Harry!" I exclaimed—"I cannot! You must not ask me!"

"Why not?" he demanded, and his voice sound hollow and unnatural.

I turned away my head, and did not answer.

"I see now how it is. That man still stands between us. Hester, I would not have believed this of you. To give me up for one who never cared for you, who never asked for your love, who is all but the husband of another! Have you no spirit—no pride? If you had, you could not do it."

Every word he uttered seemed to fall like a drop of fire on my heart.

Bitter was the humiliation which the knowledge of my unrequited passion brought me; but to hear him thus speak of it was almost more than I could bear.

"Hester," he pleaded, his voice once more changing to passionate entreaty, "will nothing induce you to take pity on me? I will wait for weeks, months, years—any time you choose to name, only do not tell me that there is no hope!"

For a moment I hesitated.

Of what value was my life to me now? Why should I not devote it to making another happy? Happy, indeed! Could Harry be happy if he knew that every thought, every feeling, every wish of my heart belonged, and would always belong, to another—to him on whom all my love had been bestowed, until there was not any left for one so good, and who so well deserved it all? No; I could not do it!

"Harry," I said, "I shall always care for you as a very dear brother; but we can never be anything more to each other."

He staggered back as though I had struck him; he was very pale, and for some time did not speak.

I felt so sorry for him, that very little would have made me yield; but the thought of the future, and the long years of misery which would be the consequence, gave me strength to say, "Do you not think we had better wish each other good-by now? There is nothing more to be said on either side."

"You are right," he answered, slowly; "and after what has happened, there cannot

be even a pretense of friendship between us. You little know what I have suffered lately, meeting you day after day, making you think that I was cold and calm, but fearing every moment that the fire which was raging within would burst forth. That is all at an end now. Heaven grant that you may find the happiness which I shall never know, and that I may never see you more!"

He was turning away, but I laid my hand on his arm.

"Harry," I said, "before you go, tell me that you forgive me."

He placed his hands on my shoulders, and looked at me for a minute or two; then I felt myself clasped in his arms, and his lips pressed to my cheek again and again.

"I cannot let you go!" he exclaimed—"I cannot—I cannot! I ask for nothing from you save the right to love you! Do not send me away like this!"

With a violent effort I released myself.

"The sooner we part, the better," I said. "Please go now."

"You are right," he answered. "As long as I am here with you, I am not master of myself. You asked me just now to forgive you. I do so, with all my heart. Farewell!"

"Farewell!" I replied.

Then he left me, and something in my heart told me that we should never meet again.

How long I remained on the beach I know not; but when I returned to the Castle, the evening shadows had commenced to fall.

Renee was standing at the gate, and came to meet me.

"Did Harry Bolton find you?" she asked. "He told me that he was going to look for you."

"Yes; he found me."

"Something has happened, Hester; you look so pale and frightened. What is it?"

"Renee, what you said to me to-day, was true. I shall never forgive myself about Harry."

"Then he has been speaking to you. Well?"

"Everything is at an end between us. We have said good-by forever."

"And that is what makes you look so miserable. If you refused to be his, I suppose it was because you did not care for him. So, why need you think any more about it?"

"Because my heart is not quite so hard as yours!" I could not help exclaiming. "When I know that I have made some one very unhappy, I cannot forget it so easily."

She gave a low, musical laugh.

"After that I am almost afraid to tell you something," she said; "but, sooner or later, you must hear it. Mr. St. John proposed to me to-day, and I accepted him."

CHAPTER IX.

AFTER that memorable day, my life flowed on in dull monotony. Renee was so much engrossed with her new lover, that I saw but little of her.

Mr. St. John's guests had all taken their departure, so he was able to spend the greater part of his time at the Castle, or in walking with Renee.

To me he was always polite and attentive, but in a lofty, condescending manner, which I could not endure; and every day I wondered more and more how any girl could tolerate him after such a man as Mr. Cowper.

Time, the great healer, was bringing relief to my aching heart; but whether what I felt was resignation to my fate, or listless apathy, I hardly knew; nor did I care to inquire too closely.

The breach between Elsbeth and me had grown wider and wider. Harry's name was hardly ever mentioned between us, nor was Mr. Cowper's; but I knew that she guessed pretty correctly how matters stood, and I knew, too, why her face always wore such a wistful, troubled expression now.

Poor Harry! I felt very sad and contrite when I thought about him.

I had not seen him since that evening when we parted on the beach.

He had thrown up his appointment almost immediately, and had gone to commence life afresh in the New World; but more of him I did not know.

My father took Renee's exchange of lovers very quietly.

"You are of age; so have the right to choose for yourself," he said. "I will give you what money you require for your trousseau, only do not be too extravagant, and do not trouble me about any of the arrangements."

Then he went back to the laboratory, to bury himself in his beloved studies.

The first snow was falling. The dark brown earth and withered herbs had disappeared, and, as far as the eye could reach, the landscape was covered with a pure white carpet.

"What a change since yesterday!" I said to Renee, as we watched the descent of the featherly flakes. "Do you remember how bare and bleak everything looked then?"

"And, as soon as the snow melts, the bareness and bleakness will return. It is but a vain, after all; and we know what lies underneath."

There was a hard, bitter ring in her voice, which I had often noticed of late.

For some time past I had been quite at a loss to understand Renee. Everything which she had seemed to wish for had fallen to her lot.

A few weeks would see her the wife of a

man of boundless wealth, able to take up her position among the leaders of society; and that I imagined was the bight of her ambition.

Yet she was not happy. A nervous restlessness had taken possession of her. At one moment she would be apparently in the highest spirits; the next, silent and depressed.

I fancied that I could trace the beginning of the change to one day, some weeks ago, when I had seen the postman give her a letter with a foreign stamp.

She put it in her pocket, and went at once to her room.

About half an hour afterward I followed her there, having some trivial question to ask her.

"What is the matter? Are you ill?" I exclaimed; for she was lying on her bed, her head buried among the pillows.

At the sound of my voice she looked up. She was very pale, and glared at me wildly.

"Was there bad news in your letter, Renee?" I asked.

"My letter! What do you know about my letter?" she cried, springing to her feet, and confronting me.

"I—I know nothing!" I faltered. "I only thought—"

"And what right had you to think? How dare you come here to spy on me?"

"But, Renee—"

"I will not hear another word! Go, will you?"

And she pointed to the door.

I left the room, sorely puzzled as to what could be the cause of all this.

When next we met, she was a little paler than usual; otherwise there were no traces of her recent agitation.

"Hester," she said, "I am afraid I frightened you that time you came to my room. But I had received a letter from an old school-fellow, telling me of the death of a great friend. It gave me rather a shock, and I did not feel inclined to talk to any one just then. Do not say anything more about it, please. I hate to be reminded of disagreeable things."

I did not allude to the subject again, but could not forget the occurrence, nor conquer the suspicion that she had not told me the truth.

After that, Renee wrote and received a good many letters.

She watched the postman closely on certain days, and took each letter which she wrote to the office herself. She sent more than one parcel, too, which she carefully registered; and once when I asked her why she never wore a costly diamond brooch—one of Mr. St. John's many gifts—she said that she had sent it to a jeweler in London to be repaired, but I noticed that the brooch was not returned.

I was thinking of all these things, and did not answer Renee's last observation.

"Hester," she said, abruptly, "that snow is just like my outer life!"

"Your outer life! What do you mean?"

"It is all a vail—a sham—a mean, pitiful deceit; looking so fair and spotless—bearing no trace of what lies underneath—hidden deep, deep down—but always there!"

And she gave a convulsive sob.

I neither loved nor respected her, but I felt more convinced than ever that she had some secret trouble, and longed to be able to comfort her.

"I wish you would trust me, Renee?" I said, putting my arm round her waist. "I am sure it would do you good to be able to speak freely to some one."

"No, no—I never can do that! Oh, Hester be thankful that you are not like me—that there has been no history like mine in your past life!"

Then, appearing to recollect herself, she said, in a changed voice: "How childish I am this evening! The snow looks so weird and ghostly, it has made me feel quite nervous! But here comes my intended! Oh, dear! I wish he were not dining here to-day! I do not feel at all in the humor to entertain him!"

As soon as possible I escaped to my room.

As I opened the door, the two paintings, "Storm" and "Calm," which were hanging on the wall, caught my attention.

"Are we to change parts?" I thought. "Is my life to be 'Calm' henceforth, and Renee's 'Storm?'"

We were sitting round the drawing-room fire after dinner—my father, Mr. St. John, Renee, and I—when Elsbeth came to the door, and called me out into the hall.

"There is a man here who tells me that he has some important private business to transact with you," she said. "I wanted him to give me his message, but he said that he must see Miss Macdonald herself, so I told him to wait in the dining-room."

Leaning against the chimney-piece was a tall, stout, middle-aged man—well-dressed, certainly, but wanting the stamp of the gentleman.

He looked up when he heard my step, and made a low bow.

"May I inquire your business with me?" I asked.

"I hoped to have the pleasure of a few minutes' conversation with Miss Macdonald," he said, in correct English, but with a very foreign accent.

"I am Miss Macdonald."

"You?—but, surely—"

"Oh! perhaps you mean my cousin?"

"I mean Miss Renee Macdonald; a young lady who came here from France. Is she not here now?"

"She is. Who shall I say wants to see her?"

"Tell her that Monsieur Guinard is anxious to renew his acquaintance with her, if you please."

"Very well."

He gave another low bow, which I acknowledged as stiffly as possible, and went back to the drawing-room to give Renee the message.

Bending over her chair, I told her, in a low voice, who wanted her.

She did not start or scream, but her face grew very white, and she struggled for breath.

"Are you not coming?" I asked, as she did not move.

She rose; and leaning heavily on my arm, left the room with me.

In the hall she stood still.

"Hester," she said, in a low, frightened whisper, "have you told that man that I am here?"

"He asked me, and I said that you were."

"I cannot see him, Hester. Go back and tell him that I am ill—that I have gone away—anything you like."

"I do not think he would believe me."

She thought for a few moments, then said, "Tell him to go back at once; I will write to him to-morrow, to the old address, only he must not remain here; then come to me to my room, and tell me what he has said."

She opened the dining-room door, and almost pushing me in, closed it after me.

"Where is Renee?" Monsieur Guinard asked, sharply.

I told him what she had said.

"So my lady will not even see me! But I do not intend to be put off like that. Write to me, indeed, and try to buy me off as she did before! But I have had enough of that already; she must do as I wish now."

"What claim have you to Renee, Monsieur Guinard?"

"Time enough for you to hear that. But look here, my dear!" And he laid his hand on my arm.

I sprung back, with an angry exclamation.

He laughed, rather uneasily, and continued: "Let me see; what was I saying? Oh, yes; you will soon hear all about me, and a thing or two about Renee as well. Now, will you have the kindness to take me to your father, her uncle? I have a few words to say to him."

"I cannot do that; he is not alone. Mr.—"

I stopped abruptly, thinking that I might do harm by telling too much.

"Mr. St. John—that is the name of the man she is going to marry, is it not?" he said, quietly. "But I am going to put a stop to that."

And, pushing past me, he went into the hall.

The sound of voices was faintly audible, and, guided by these, he soon found the right door, opened it, and walked into the drawing-room.

"Pardon, gentlemen," he said, coolly seating himself beside Mr. St. John, who had raised his eye-glass to survey the unexpected arrival. "It is rather late for a formal visit, but I have some business to arrange with you, which I want to get done at once."

"Say what it is, as quickly as possible!" exclaimed my father, impatiently; "and let me have an explanation of this unwarrantable intrusion."

"That explanation I will give with pleasure, as soon as Miss Renee honors us with her presence."

"Renee!—what have you to do with her?" asked Mr. St. John, in accents of intense surprise.

"A great deal, I can assure you," Monsieur Guinard answered, folding his arms, and leaning back in his chair.

"Hester, where is your cousin?" asked my father, turning to me.

"In her room, I believe."

"Bring her here."

Renee did not say a word when I told her what had happened. As one stunned and bewildered by a sudden blow, she suffered me to lead her as far as the drawing-room door.

Then she started back.

"What are you doing? Where are you taking me?" she cried. "I cannot go in. He is there!"

But at that moment my father placed his hand on her wrist.

"Come here, and have this explained," he said, sternly.

And she had to yield.

"My darling child," exclaimed Monsieur Guinard, coming toward her with extended arms—"my precious one, have I found you at last?"

But she motioned him away, and, with an affected sigh, he said; "Cruel, ungrateful, as usual! But now, my friends, listen to my story. My father was the manager of a small but highly respectable theater in Paris, and at his death I succeeded him. The star of my company was my only sister, Lucille. But just as her fame was at its zenith she must needs make a runaway match with a good-for-nothing Scotchman. I never saw her again; but years afterward I discovered, by accident, that she was dead, and that her husband had placed their daughter as pupil teacher at a school in a small village near Paris. I went to see my niece, and obtained leave for her to visit me. I told her a great deal about the stage and she soon began to compare the weary life she led at school with the delightful existence of actors and actresses. The result was, she left the academy, and joined us. Her father gave his consent on condition of my allowing him a small sum monthly. Renee has inherited a

double portion of her mother's talent, and after a little training was able to take the principal parts, and for two years was our brightest ornament."

He paused, and there was silence in the room.

"Renee, is all this true?"

It was my father who spoke.

Mr. St. John had not once looked at her.

"Yes, uncle, it is."

"Certainly it is true," continued Monsieur Guinard. "When her father was dying he sent for her, and for a long time I was not able to make out what he had done with her; but she was of age a few days before she left me, and signed papers binding herself to me for three years; and not only that, but her betrothal with my son, Antoine, was publicly announced. Now can you say that I have no claim to her—no right to come here to look for her? She has treated me very badly, and nearly broken my poor son's heart; but we do not wish to force her inclinations in any way. If we can come to a friendly agreement, we will consent to renounce all claim to her, and permit her to live where she pleases, and marry as she likes."

"To what kind of friendly agreement do you allude?" asked my father.

"I mean that you must make it worth our while to give her up. She is worth three or four hundred a year to the theater. Then there are my Antoine's feelings to be considered. I cannot name a smaller sum than three thousand—or, perhaps I may be very generous, and say two."

That two thousand pounds could be found in my father's power to give we all very well knew was out of the question.

Involuntarily he glanced at Mr. St. John, and so did I.

He had been sitting, his head resting on his hand, and now, looking up, said, "Miss Renee Macdonald was my affianced wife. That being the case, I wish to keep this business as private as possible. I will pay you the sum you demand as the price of her freedom from her engagements to you and your son."

Renee threw herself on her knees beside him, and rested her head against his arm.

"How can I ever thank you?" she said, in her softest voice. "I never knew how noble and generous you were, or how much you loved me until now."

"You must not misunderstand me," he answered, rising, and moving away from her a few steps. She rose, too, and fixed on him an inquiring look. "Miss Renee," he went on, "and you, Mr. Macdonald, let me assure you that no one can feel more deeply grieved than I do by what has occurred. When I asked the young lady to be my wife I knew nothing of

the part of her history which this gentleman has now told us. No one can therefore blame me for breaking off our engagement. As to the two thousand pounds, more if necessary—”

“Silence!” commanded Renee, her voice trembling with passion. “Do not insult me by offering me money. I have had enough of you and your fair, false world of fashion. My father on his dying bed charged me to shake off old associations, to become one of those whom society calls honorable and respectable. I tried hard to do so, but all in vain. Oh, how I have pined and sickened for one glimpse of my native land. How longed to stand before a crowded audience once more, and receive the ovations of applause which are my due! The stage is my home; I see it all now. My heart has told me so all along, and I would not listen to it, because, indeed, I hoped to win a place in your cold, dull, formal social world. Take back these baubles!”—and dragging ring after ring from her fingers, she flung them on the ground at Mr. St. John’s feet. “These too!”—and bracelets, earrings, and a shower of pearls followed. “There! why don’t you pick them up, to keep safely for the piece of uncontaminated humanity whom you will think worthy of bearing your name—a woman who never degraded herself by appearing before the footlights; never was disgraced by receiving cheers and applause? And when the name of Renee Macdonald is famous throughout the length and breadth of the dramatic world, she will scorn you, as you now scorn her! Hester, uncle, farewell! You have been very kind to me—much kinder than I deserved. Our paths lie in different directions, but I shall never forget you. Now I am ready to go with you!” and she passed her hand through Monsieur Guinard’s arm. “I am yours now—yours and Antoine’s!”

“Stay!” said my father, placing himself before her. “You cannot go to-night.”

“I must! I will dress myself warmly; I do not fear the cold. Hester, will you help me to put up my things?”

I went with her to her room.

A few minutes sufficed to pack a few necessities in a small traveling bag, but until we had finished neither of us spoke.

Then Renee, taking both my hands in hers, looked long and earnestly at me.

“Hester,” she said, slowly, “shall we ever meet again?”

“I hope so, Renee.”

“You hope so!” she exclaimed. “Well, with all my faults, I think, perhaps, you do care for me a little, and I feel sure you will think of me sometimes when I am gone.”

“When you are gone, Renee!” I repeated. “It all seems so strange and unreal. I can hardly believe that it is not a dream!”

“The snow has melted, and you see what is beneath at last. Do you remember what we were saying this afternoon, just before Mr. St. John came? I did not think that the climax was so near at hand then. A glorious climax it certainly was! Did you ever see anything to equal the expression of Mr. St. John’s countenance when my respected uncle claimed relationship with me?”

And a wild, strange laugh rung out through the room.

“Renee, I cannot understand you. Are you glad or sorry to go?”

“I hardly know myself. Yes; I am glad, charmed, delighted. The dream of my life will be realized at last. When I think of the strange scenes I have lived through, I wonder how I could have existed here all these months without being moped to death. And Mr. St. John—oh, how he used to weary me! I was like a prisoner in gilded fetters; but the chains are broken now. I am free—free!”

“Tell me something about your cousin Antoine, Renee. Do you care for him? Do you really wish to marry him?”

“I do, Hester. You will not believe me, perhaps, but I do love that man. I loved him while I was engaged to Mr. Cowper—loved him passionately at the moment when I promised to be Mr. St. John’s wife. I tried hard to persuade myself that I did not, and sometimes almost succeeded. I wonder what my life would have been if I had married Mr. St. John? He would have been proud of me, as he is proud of his hunters, or his mansion in London; and I should have cared for him as I care for the money which is the ‘open sesame’ to pleasure. Courted and admired in London for some months every year, I then should have gone back to the country, to play Madame Bountiful among his tenants, and all the time longing and pining for the old stage life; yes, and for him, too—for Antoine!”

“Loving him so, how could you make up your mind to treat him as you have done?”

“Dear little innocent! love is not everything in the world. Did I not tell you that I hoped to be able to take my place among the upper ten thousand?—and as I could not bring him up with me, there was nothing for it but to leave him behind. But since Fate has ordained that the upper ten are never to number me as one of them, I bow my head meekly to her decree. Oh how delighted the poor fellow will be to have me back!”

“And yet your uncle said that they would let you remain with us for two thousand pounds,” I could not help saying.

Her brow darkened.

“My uncle would have sold me. He would sell his own child, I believe; but Antoine—ever: I do not believe him when he says that

Antoine was willing to give me up; and even if he were, would it not be treating me as I would have treated him? But we must not delay any longer. Lock my bag, and give me the key."

"Renee, may I ask you one question?"

"Yes; I suppose you may."

"Is that Antoine's portrait in the locket you lost in the village one day, a good while ago?"

"Yes. What a good memory you have!"

"Do you always wear it?"

"I do. But come, now; my uncle will be impatient."

"Very well. But what do you wish done about your clothes? That bag holds so little."

"You will have the rest sent after me," she said, then. "I will let you know when and where to send them; but, remember, everything that that man gave me must go back to him at once. But what are you looking at? Oh, those withered flowers! They may be thrown away; they are only some of the roses Mr. Cowper gave me that June morning. Do you remember?"

Did I remember?

"I am ready now," she said, wrapping a warm cloak round her.

She kissed me two or three times; then went down-stairs. I followed her slowly, carrying her bag.

Monsieur Guinard took it out of my hand, and offered his arm to his niece.

On the door-step she paused, and looked back at me.

Was I mistaken, or was she really weeping?

CHAPTER X.

THE tempest, which had been raging for hours, was over; the sea still rose and fell uneasily, but the huge breakers had subsided into angry swells. Dark masses of cloud still lingered on the horizon, which the sun had just pierced with his bright beams, which were soothing troubled nature into peace and rest.

Once more I stood in the little cove at the foot of the beetling cliffs, my eyes fixed on the well-known scene before me; but my thoughts had wandered far, far away, back to the shadowy past. I thought of my brief dream of happiness and my bitter awakening; of the friend of my childhood who had loved me so truly, yet so vainly; and of Renee, so bright and lovely, so false and heartless!

What her life had been since she left us we never heard. One short letter was all that I received from her. I answered it at once, begging her to write often, and to tell me all about herself; but to that letter I never received a reply.

For more than two years after her departure nothing occurred to break the monotony of my life.

Then came a time of passionate grief, when I knelt beside Elsbeth's dying bed, and listened to the last words of the faithful old servant, who had been all but a mother to me.

There was no reserve or concealment between us then.

She told me how she had mourned and wept over my blind folly, and now she bitterly reproached herself for not having better kept the promise she had made to Harry to watch over me.

"Do not blame yourself, Elsbeth," I said, again and again. "You could have done nothing for me. I was determined to go my own way."

"Perhaps you are right," she would say; but I felt that her grief for my blighted life was troubling her last hours.

About a month after her death my father was taken dangerously ill.

I nursed him as well as I could, and had the satisfaction of feeling that at last he had learned to value me a little. Still, when the end came, I felt, no so much that I had lost a parent, as that I now stood alone in the world.

Yes, quite alone; for I knew that there could be no possible sympathy between me and the rich, fashionable aunt, my mother's step-sister, with whom I was henceforth to live.

There had been but little communication between her and my father; but she was my only near relative, and, by his direction, I had written to her shortly before his death.

She arrived at the Castle in a few days, and proved herself a capital woman of business.

All the domestic arrangements were taken out of my hands.

She ordered and directed everything, finding fault with whatever she herself had not superintended.

Any opposition to her will was utterly hopeless, and soon I found myself submitting like a child to her guidance.

Very little remained out of the wreck of the family property; and as no other course seemed open, I agreed to accept the offer which my aunt made, of taking me to live with her in London.

And so my last day in my old home came.

The next morning I was to leave it with my aunt, to commence a new existence as her humble companion, dependent on her bounty, and expected to be deeply grateful for any marks of affection and kindness which she might, now and then, see fit to show me.

I shuddered when I thought what was before me; but knew that since such was my fate, I must bow my head meekly before it.

The sound of footsteps in the distance suddenly roused me from my reverie. It was a quick, decided tread, such as I had so often waited and listened for in bygone days.

Strange fancy!—and I almost laughed at myself for my folly. Still my breath came thick and fast, and my heart beat wildly as the steps came nearer.

It was no fancy after all.

Herbert Cowper and I had met once more.

I hardly knew whether I was waking or dreaming. I felt my hands warmly clasped in his; but no word of welcome fell from my trembling lips.

"I felt certain that I should find you here, Hester," he said. "Something told me that you would be waiting for me in the place where first we met. But will you not say that you are glad to see me again?"

"I am glad to see you," I answered, speaking almost mechanically.

"This is the rock where we used to sit together. Does it not look like an old friend? Come, we will rest here, and you must tell me all about yourself, poor child! I know that you have been greatly tried lately!"

"Then you know that I have lost my father and Elsbeth?" I said; "and am going to-morrow with my aunt to London. I have nothing more to tell."

"Then you must listen to me for a few minutes. I have a great deal to say to you. Have you forgotten the day when I asked you for your friendship, Hester? That was the beginning of a very happy time for me. Do you remember my telling you that I always associated you with the mountain heather? I see that you do, but you did not suspect then how dear you were becoming to me. I had resolved to win your love, when that girl, with her false, fair face, came between us. She cast a spell over me, making me her slave—her blind, idolatrous slave. There is no need for me to remind you how and why we parted. At first I was half mad with grief, rage, and disappointment, but soon learned to bless the day on which I was set free from a bondage which would have been the bane of my life. Then my heart went back again to you, and I longed to find you to tell you all, and to ask you if there were any hope for me, but I dared not. Perhaps you wonder why. Do you remember telling me the legend of Edith Macdonald, and what you answered when I asked you what you would have done had you been in her place? 'What right had he to offer her the crumbs of his love?' you said; and I felt that I could not offer you the crumbs of mine, the scorned and despised leavings of another! A spirit of restless wandering took possession of me. Since then I have wandered over the greater part of the world. Many and strange the adventures I have encountered, but a month past I met with the strangest of all. I had joined a hunting party in North America, and whom should

I find among the number but Harry Bolton. You know that there was but little friendship between us, and for some days we studiously avoided each other. One night, however, it so happened that we two had to sit up by the watch-fire together, and we began to talk of you. How it came about, I can hardly say, but soon each knew that the other loved you. Hester, he is a noble fellow. 'Go, tell her your story,' he said; 'from something that she once said to me, I feel convinced that she will not refuse to listen to you.' And so I came to find you. You know all now. Is the love I have to offer you too worthless to accept?"

"Worthless! No; any thing but that!" I said.

"Then you will love me a little, Hester?"

"I have loved you with all my heart since the first day I saw you," I answered.

The theater was crowded to overflowing; curiosity and expectation were at their height, for a French star, who had been creating an enormous sensation in Paris, was to appear, that night, for the first time, on the London stage.

I was conscious of the hum of many voices round me, but they sounded distant and indistinct. The outer world with its gayeties and amusements, was nothing to me, for happiness, perfect and complete, had fallen to my lot. He was beside me, the man whom I had loved so long, and as I had thought vainly and hopelessly, and in another week I was to be his wife.

It had not been our desire to go to the theater that evening, but I was still an inmate of my aunt's house, and her wishes were law.

"Every one is going to see Mademoiselle Olympe to-night; of course you must go," she had said. And so we went.

But the thought that I was about to see a great actress made very little impression on me. I was thinking how much pleasanter it would have been had Herbert and I been allowed to remain at home.

"And so you actually knew her—you have often spoken to her?" some one near me exclaimed.

The remark was addressed by a bright, animated-looking young girl, to the gentleman beside her.

They were so close to us that even had she not spoken so loud we could have heard every word distinctly.

"Yes," he answered, smiling at her enthusiasm. "Only think! I was talking to her for a long time this morning."

"Do, please, tell me all you know about her; I want so much to hear."

"Well, her mother was French; but I believe her father belonged to a very good Scotch or English family, I forget which. I heard

what her name was, but I cannot remember it."

"Is not Mademoiselle Olympe her real name?"

"Oh, no; that is only her stage name. At any rate, her father's people took her up for a while; and the report is that she ran away and joined her mother's relations, who were connected with the theater. She married a cousin of hers. I know very little of him; but he is very jealous of his wife, and some say that he is not kind to her. My opinion is that he only cares for her for what he can make by her. However, she seems very fond of him; why, no one can make out. Some months ago, when he was dangerously ill, she nursed him with such devotion that she almost wore herself out. I heard that she was almost crazy all the time that his life was in danger, but as soon as he was better commenced a violent flirtation with an Italian count. No one can understand that woman. But we must not talk any more now, the play is going to begin."

The curtain was raised, and I saw Renee again.

Like, yet unlike herself, her beauty seemed almost supernatural; and she acted her part with a power and passion which held the whole house as though spell-bound.

With a strange, sickening sense of dread I watched her. Was she once more to dash the cup of happiness from my lips—to rob me of all that made my life worth having? I dared not think of the possibility, and was afraid to look at Herbert Cowper.

Once I turned from the stage, and glanced round the house.

Directly opposite I recognized Mr. St. John. He, too, had come to witness Mademoiselle Olympe's first appearance.

It seemed so strange to see him there, and I wondered if he were thinking of the time when she had been his promised wife; or if he had seen her since the evening when they had parted with such bitter words.

But it was impossible to judge. His languid, aristocratic countenance betrayed no trace of agitation.

For some time he calmly surveyed her

through his opera-glass, and then leaned back with a yawn.

Gathering all my courage, I glanced at Herbert.

He was very pale, and until the close of the last act neither moved nor spoke.

Then, laying his hand on my arm, he whispered, "Did you know that *she* and Mademoiselle Olympe were the same, Hester?"

"No; I had not the least idea."

"Nor I. If I had, I would not have been here. But now I am glad that I came, for I have proved to myself that her power over me is completely gone—that the love which once I fancied that I felt for her was only a fevered dream. You, and you alone, are the mistress of my heart!"

Deafening thunders of applause were rending the air, and shaking the building to its very foundations; bouquets of costly flowers were showered on the stage, until they lay in a bruised, fragrant mass at her feet.

Again and again she bowed and smiled to the enraptured audience; again and again the thunders of applause were renewed with redoubled energy.

Proudly triumphant she looked in her rich, radiant beauty; but I noticed how one glance of withering scorn was cast in the direction of the box where Mr. St. John sat.

What her inner life was I knew not; probably I should never know.

Whether her spirit was still fretting and chafing, wearing itself out in restless, unsatisfied longing for some unattainable bliss; or, whether, the highest goal of her ambition being reached, she had found perfect content and happiness, was her secret and hers alone.

I felt no envy of her now. The whole world might turn away from the mountain heather, and bow the knee before the beautiful blush-rose. What did it matter to me now that Herbert Cowper loved me?

Every one was speaking of her, of her beauty and talent; exhausting every possible epithet of praise and admiration.

But I felt no humiliation in the thought that the love and happiness which filled my life were some of the crumbs which had fallen from her table!

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